

“Approaching Life Crosswise”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
February 19, 2017**

Old Testament lesson: Psalm 19:7-11

New Testament lesson: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

A couple of years ago, there was an initiative to change the handicap parking sign. The current sign shows a stick figure with arms stuck out perfectly straight and an impossibly ridge posture attached to a circle symbolizing the wheelchair.

The new sign would have the stick figure leaning forward, arms back and in motion sitting in the wheelchair, rather than being attached to it. The idea is the person is not part of the chair but rather someone who uses the chair in his her active life.

The hope is that changing the symbol will change society’s perspective of people who use wheelchairs. In much the same way, the Apostle Paul urged the early church to rethink the symbol of the cross. The cross of 2,000 years ago was a symbol of death. The Roman emperor used it to show what happens to people who disobey. The cross of ancient Rome always had some poor soul hanging on it, dying.

But our cross is empty. For us, the cross is not a sign of death, but of rebirth. At the core of our rebirth as Christians – our ongoing growth and nurture as followers of Christ – is a shift in our perspective on wisdom and power as symbolized in the cross, and a shift in our ability to invite others to claim for themselves the wisdom of God and the self-sacrificing power of Christ.

I think we will all agree that to get ahead in this world, it takes a certain degree of wisdom and power. No doubt about it. And here comes Paul challenging our perspective on wisdom and power saying, “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Paul takes the wisdom of the world – which in his day saw the cross as a sign of humiliation and death – and through that cross, Paul points to the power of God. The wisdom of the cross – the wisdom of God – is actually quite different from how things appear in the world, even today. The wisdom of the cross is summed up in the familiar words of Matthew 16, where Jesus says, “... If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Matt. 16:24-25)

Contrast that teaching – that call to selfless giving – with what counts as the wisdom of the world today. The world today finds itself in a monumental struggle between wealth accumulation and selfless giving, between wielding power and showing mercy, between letter-of-the-law justice and making room for grace, between being jealous of the next guy and being content with who we are.

We see this struggle playing out all around us. Politics, Wall Street, and big business are, for the most part, all about wealth and power, with little desire to give of themselves for the sake of our society. Not all politicians and corporations focus solely on wealth and power, but a lot do – so many that our systems of government and corporate finance seem more hurtful than helpful these days, though there is hope!

Likewise, the American justice system is struggling with who to prosecute and who to leave be – whether we’re talking about immigration, marijuana laws, or equal treatment under the law regardless of race, ethnicity and the like.

And what about young people today? They are bombarded with stories and images of singers and athletes, celebrities and video-game avatars (characters) who push the limits of right and wrong, self-expression and self-absorption, but there is hope!

There is hope that we the people will have a voice in government and corporate regulations, there is hope that one day everyone will be treated fairly under the law, there is hope that individuals will embrace their true selves instead of being jealous of their neighbor or some celebrity or video-game fantasy.

The Apostle Paul points to that hope in his letter to the Corinthians, which we heard read today. Paul turns to the church –to us- and asks, in light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, “Where is the one who is wise,” the one who has it all figured out. “Where is the scribe,” the one who decides what’s right and what’s wrong. “Where is the debater,” the one who argues equally well using truth and lies to suit the purpose.

The answer to these questions, the answer to the know-it-alls, the power hungry and those who manipulate the truth, says Paul is the presence and power of God in and through the church, the church that Christ calls into existence through the cross.

The Holy Spirit continues to bring people into relationship with Christ that they might align themselves with God’s power, God’s will, guided by God’s wisdom. And that is happening through us, through the church, when we step out beyond worldly wisdom and point instead to Jesus.

The people we hope would come to church have a lot of “reasons” why they aren’t interested, why it doesn’t fit their schedules, why it’s not what they believe. But that’s no reason for us to lose hope or for the church to cease existing.

We just have to broaden our perspective of church, and help society to do the same.

George Lindbeck, in the article “True Worship, Real Evangelism,” notes that, at the time of Paul, newcomers to the faith did not first understand the faith and then decide to become Christian. No, they first got invited to visit a community of faith and then came to understand what it means to be Christian.¹

It’s not our job to convince people it’s worth coming to church or volunteering in the community – worth getting up on Sunday morning or coming out on Wednesday evening, worth reprioritizing their week, worth giving of themselves for the sake of others.

There are as many arguments “for” as there are “against” – it’s not a debate we will win. What we are called to do is invite people anyway, despite all the perfectly understandable reasons it’s not convenient or doesn’t make sense for them.

Or as Paul puts it, “... Since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation (our invitation), to save those who believe,” those who are willing to come alongside us and see what it’s all about, and get their life out of it in the process.

In other words, it is only by stepping out in faith and embracing the Spirit of Christian worship, nurture, and service that people come to see what life is truly all about.

Our task in all of this is to continually find new and innovative ways to bring people into relationship with the church, which is the body of Christ, the hands and feet and heart of Jesus. There are numerous ways that we as a church are doing this– creating opportunities for people to come alongside us.

This Thursday is *Family Care Night* at Proctor Elementary School, a time for parents and grandparents to learn about positive behavioral supports, to bring more peace and love to the household. Consider going Thursday evening, and invite a neighbor or friend to come with you.

Ash Wednesday is March 1 here in our Sanctuary, just a week and a half away. Plan to attend, and bring a friend.

Our Spring Spaghetti Fling is March 5. Who doesn’t like spaghetti !?! – and for a good cause–the youth of our church.

These are just a few of the dozens of opportunities for us and others to be involved in the life of the church, in the work of Jesus Christ, through the power and wisdom of God.

¹ Marva Dawn, "True worship, real evangelism," Christian Century, April 21-28, 1999, 458.

I know it's hard to ask people, but I encourage you to do it anyway. God promises to work through us as a church and you as an individual to touch someone's life for the better. But that takes us stepping out of our comfort zone and broadening our perspective of church to include those who don't yet see it, the value of a faith community.

Each of us can attend at least one upcoming event in the weeks ahead. I challenge all of us to find someone to ask. If you do that, if we do that, we might be surprised to find that God is just waiting to work through us, through you, for the benefit of another family, the community we live in, the world we share. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

When we do not know which way to turn, O God, give us the wisdom to turn to you.

We come to this time of prayer with our hearts and minds aware of issues and situations that are troubling – both to us and to you.

Whether these issues concern our families, our employment, public safety, individual rights, national leadership, or our own leadership roles in the community, our church and elsewhere, Lord, we pray that you grant each of us the grace to honestly acknowledge the part we have played.

Guide us forward, Lord, in thanksgiving for the wisdom and power you bring to worldly troubles. Open our hearts to the power of the Holy Spirit as we listen for your voice in the silence.

We offer our gratitude for your presence, most holy and loving God, through the reassuring voice of the Holy Spirit, speaking to in prayer, in the wise counsel of friends, in the chance encounter of a stranger that becomes a God moment in our lives.

We pray, too, for those in special need of your healing, provision, and comfort.

Guide us to wholeness, O God, through the one who makes all things and all people new, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to say when we pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**