

The Foolishness of God
Exodus 20:1-17; I Corinthians 1:18-25

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By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

Why did it have to happen this way? With the death of a man on a cross? Why the nails and the crown of thorns? Why abandonment by his friends and that haunting cry of dereliction: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Why way back then in that part of the world? And why Jesus of Nazareth?

We learned in seminary to call this the atonement, the belief that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto God’s self. For more and more people today that seems unbelievable. Some suggest that we really don’t need this bloody, primitive talk of the death of Jesus anymore. From Bill Maher to Richard Dawkins to Sam Harris and others, they literally mock the cross of Jesus. The comedian Bill Maher calls God a psychopath, a mass murderer. Jesus, he has said, is just one God killed. Our high-tech, sophisticated, post-modern world is beyond that, some argue. “Foolishness,” they say. “Just plain foolishness.”

So what are we to think about this event so central to our faith? Must we sound an uncertain note when we speak of the death of Jesus Christ? Or is there a place for thoughtful, post-modern Christians in this conversation?

We need to remember that people have been saying things like this as far back as the Apostle Paul. “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,” he wrote to the Corinthians. “Sheer folly” is what the New English Bible says. The cross of Jesus Christ: just sheer folly.

When we read Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, it helps to understand something of the Greek culture of that day. Remember, the Greek world of Paul’s time was shaped by some of history’s great philosophers: Socrates, who lived about 400 years before Jesus; Plato, who lived about 300 years before Jesus; Plato’s pupil, Aristotle; and a contemporary of Paul named Seneca. The Greeks were in love with wisdom. In fact, that’s what the word philosophy means: “the love of wisdom.” Like technology or entertainment

in our time, the desire for wisdom drove their culture. It was a quest to know the meaning of life, which they believed ultimately led them to God.

Paul's argument to the Corinthians was that God cannot be known through wisdom. Wisdom, as a means of seeking God, is fundamentally flawed. Human wisdom has to do with human ability, and people have ability in differing degrees. Some people are naturally very smart. Others are not. Some will never have the cognitive ability to be "wise," and it's not always their fault. Some people's cognitive ability is challenged, held back, because of medical reasons or injury. Must they therefore be separated from God? Human wisdom has another failing. It fails to incorporate the heart, the emotive dimension of life. Seeking God through wisdom is like seeking love by reading romance novels. Or experiencing a newborn baby from the other side of the glass window. Something's missing. And one other flaw of wisdom. The Infinite is ultimately unknowable by the finite. Our language and symbols are too small, too inadequate to capture the infinite nature of God. As much as wisdom may have to commend it, it is fundamentally flawed. Therefore, Paul says, "The Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified."

"Foolish!" the critics protested. "Sheer folly," some say even today. But not Paul. Paul says that "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom."

Here's why. Paul believed that God was in this event. God was in Christ. That is how God was reconciling the world to God's self. God was not a passive observer during the Passion of Christ, sulking because God's feelings somehow had been hurt. The cross was not punishment to appease an angry God. It was not one God suffering for another God. The cross was God's way of identifying with humanity. Here it is: God became one of us. The Word became flesh, John said. In the cross we see the supreme example of the world's supreme power: the power of voluntary, vicarious suffering.

Paul calls this simply "the power of God," the power that changes not only the mind but also the heart. It is not a power that forces and manipulates. There's no coercion here, not for you, me, Bill Maher, or anyone else. It is the power of identification, a power that invites, understands, and woos.

Foolishness? Sheer folly? That is what each of us must decide. Here's what I've decided: "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."

A Prayer of Confession is printed in your worship guide. Please join me as we prepare to come to the Lord's Table.