2-17/18-18 Rev. Amy Haines

1 Corinthians 1:18–25 Lenten Series

Foolish Love…is the Message of the Cross

Although I love the music, the candlelight service, and the wonder of Christmas, I have to admit that Holy Week is my favorite season of the church year. Not just Easter, when we celebrate Christ’s resurrection from the dead. The whole week prior to Easter. Jesus’ triumphal entry and kids waving palm branches. Jesus’ sharing the bread and the cup at his last meal with his disciples. Judas’ betrayal. Peter’s denial. Jesus’ prayer of anguish. The anger of mob mentality.

Jesus’ death. The loyalty of the women.

Holy Week is a rollercoaster of emotions, just like life. As I imagine myself present in Jerusalem that week, I wonder, Would I have fled? Would I have cried “crucify”? Would I have stood faithfully by?

Although uncomfortable, we have to journey to the cross before we journey to the tomb.

For only through the agony of the cross can we understand the good news of the empty tomb.

And only through the lens of resurrection does the cross become a symbol of the power and wisdom of God.

Last Wednesday we began the journey of Lent, the 40 days leading up to Easter, a time for us to renew our faith journeys, to ponder what the cross means to us, and to give thanks for God’s foolish love for us. Since Lent began on Valentine’s Day and ends on April Fools’ Day, our Lenten focus this year will be on God’s “Foolish Love” for us as well as God’s call to us to follow Christ’s ways of love that the world considers foolish.

I am still in humble amazement that our congregation, along with the United Church of Christ,

takes the solemnity of Ash Wednesday so seriously to begin the journey of Lent. Wednesday night was a powerful service for me as I put ashen crosses on the foreheads of so many of you…including my own children. On a day in which we celebrated human love, on a day in which other parents were grieving the sudden loss of their children once again to the violence of this world, to place and to see an ashen cross on the forehead of my daughter almost choked me up.

A cross of ash…what a powerful symbol of our own mortality, but also a symbol of God’s great love for us. For God’s foolish love for the world…is the message of the cross of Christ.

Think about the symbol of the cross, the primary symbol of the Christian faith. How many crosses do you see in or on this building? Here in the sanctuary there is a cross on the top of the Christian flag, on the light fixtures, and on the wall behind me. The cross window is covered for Lent, yet can be seen from the outside. Every time I enter this building I see the United Methodist cross and flame on our sign, and on the end of our building. In my office there is a metal cross hanging on my wall.

How many crosses do you have around your house? I would not want to count how many crosses are in our home, several of which are still packed away. We have small crosses to go above the children’s beds. I have cross necklaces and cross earrings. We have had crosses made of yarn and of paper, crosses made of wood and of metal, crosses large and crosses small.

In high school I would occasionally wear around my neck a cross I received at summer camp, which was made of large, flat black nails hung on a leather strap. If I could have found which box it was packed in, I would have brought it with me today. Nowadays that cross might be banned as a weapon. The only time I was ever hurt by it was when my friends were goofing around that they were going to stab me with it. I wore it as a bold statement of my faith.

Unfortunately, the cross is now seen more as a cool piece of jewelry rather than a statement of faith. I get disturbed when rappers wear large golden crosses then speak lyrics that are the exact opposite of who we are called to be as Christ followers. Whenever I wear any cross jewelry I become aware of how congruent or incongruent my words and actions are that day in relation to the message of the cross and who that cross represents.

With the exception of Jesus’ death on the cross, consider what the cross represented to everyone who lived in the Roman Empire of the first century. The cross represented death. It represented humiliation. It represented the mighty power of Rome to brutally suppress any and all who would come against the empire.

Rome had brought peace to the region—the *Pax* *Romana*—a forced peace that was kept through military might. Any and all who dared cause trouble for Rome, including insurrectionists and thieves, were killed through the slow torture and agony of death on a cross.

The cross was seen as such a vile instrument of death that crucifixions were banned from being discussed in polite society. Virtually everyone had seen a crucifixion, as they were often carried out along major roadways as a deterrent to others. Yet crucifixions were not discussed, for those killed on the cross were often considered the riffraff of society.

How hard is it today for us to imagine how vulgar the image of a cross was in the first century?

Can you imagine wearing a little electric chair around your neck? Can you imagine wearing a gun symbol around your neck, representing a firing squad? Can you imagine wearing a hangman’s noose around your neck? If you shudder at imagining any of those symbols, then you have a glimpse of what the cross represented—the ultimate, lowest and most painful form of death possible in the Roman Empire.

And yet—and yet—it was on the cross, the vilest form of death, the symbol of ultimate power for the empire—it was on the cross that God displayed God’s power and wisdom, God’s compassion and salvation, for all people, for all eternity.

On the cross God reached out to us, with arms of love and with forgiving grace, and reminded us that nothing we do can earn our place in heaven, nothing we do can earn God’s love for us.

Instead, through the cross and the empty tomb, through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection here on earth, God showed us how much God cares for us, and offered us a path of salvation, a way to be forgiven for our sins, through faith in Christ Jesus.

The cross is a vile symbol of death, flipped by God into a symbol of new life. For those of us who believe, this makes perfect sense. Yet to many in the world around us, Jesus’ death on a cross as a symbol of God’s love for us is foolishness, wishful thinking, make believe. That is what the world says to us who believe.

Today’s Scripture reflects on the power of the message of the cross. Yet this power is not a power everyone will embrace.

The apostle Paul is writing here to the early Christian church at Corinth, a bustling sea town with a rich diversity. Through the power of the Holy Spirit Paul had found a group of Jews and Gentiles who believed in Christ crucified and formed a Christian community of faith. Yet once Paul moved on to another town, the church was threatened by societal differences in their midst. Instead of standing strong as a new community led by a new ethic, they were being torn apart by everything that divided them—money, authority, backgrounds, power, knowledge.

So Paul began this letter to the young church in Corinth by reminding them of the core of the gospel message—we preach a crucified and risen Savior and Lord. Christ is God’s unexpected power and God’s wisdom evident in our world, for all people regardless of background or social standing. Christ is who unites us into one body of faith, one community of love, one church.

At the Believe Tour for junior high youth this weekend, there were many different churches from many different denominations in attendance. Southwest Church here in Springboro and Lebanon Presbyterian were there. We ran into Jacob Hams and his youth group from Milford as well as a former church member of mine from McComb and her son. Youth groups were there from many states. And where we were from did not matter. We came together with Jesus as our focus, all members of the church universal, to worship together and learn together how to live as followers of Jesus in a world that often ridicules us.

Paul declared, **“**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.” (v18 NRSV)

“The Message that points to Christ on the Cross seems like sheer silliness to those hellbent on destruction, but for those on the way of salvation it makes perfect sense.” (v18 MSG)

Paul goes on to say that this message is foolishness to both Jews and Gentiles.

The Jews were always looking for miraculous and extraordinary signs of God’s presence among them. They were looking for another rainbow or burning bush or pillar of fire or still small voice.

The Greeks were always trying to explain everything through reason and logic and intelligence, including the existence of God and the purpose of faith. When they believed in the gods on Mt Olympus, a crucified human as Savior appeared to them as preposterous. They wanted a God who made sense.

Yet our God is the God of the unexpected. The youngest chosen to lead Israel. An unwed young woman as the mother of God. The Son of God being a humble carpenter from a nondescript rural village who was born in a borrowed stable. The cross as a symbol of life over death.

Diverse communities brought together as the body of Christ.

Both Jew and Greek looked at the early Christians and believed them to be fools—literally a bunch of morons, because they dared to believe that one who was crucified was their Savior.

These skeptics would rather stick to the wisdom and societal divisions and beliefs of the world around them, believing in the Roman gods or yearning for a warrior king, then risk their reputations, their traditions and their lives to believe in a crucified and risen savior.

Have you ever had someone scoff at your faith in Jesus? Our modern world is no longer divided simply into Jews and Gentiles, but nevertheless we still look to signs and wisdom, to miracles and intelligence, to prove that God exists and God cares for us or to disprove the existence of God and criticize the futility of faith.

Like the Jews looking for signs, many in our world today view good health or wealth as signs of God’s favor. They believe that if one is blessed materially or physically that is a sign of also being blessed by God. Yet I have met many who barely had two dollars to their name, or those who constantly battle health concerns, who have a deep faith in Jesus.

Like the Greeks, many still seek to prove or disprove the existence of Christ and explain the miracles of the Bible through reason and logic and scientific knowledge. There are many scientists who do believe in God, for amid the wonder and mystery of the world around us they cannot deny our Creator God.

Now there is nothing wrong with health and wealth and intelligence. The danger lies in when they are used to prove or disprove God. We cannot know all of God’s ways. There will be times in life when we cry out, “Why, God?”

Yet we are still called to step out in faith. We are still called to remember that God seeks a relationship with us, through faith in Christ Jesus. God loves us and calls us and redeems us, and this is most evident in Jesus’ death upon a cross.

The idea that Jesus--as the Son of God—chose to allow himself to be crucified is absolute foolishness if one tries to view the cross through the lens of the world, through the power of reason or the power of military might. But if one views the crucifixion of Christ through the lens of faith, then his death on the cross makes sense and proclaims the wisdom and power of God’s love.

The cross is the ultimate symbol of God’s foolish love for us. God willingly suffered and died to break sin’s curse upon our lives. Who else do you know who would go to such great lengths to love you, and save you, and redeem you?

As we begin this journey of Lent, a journey that takes us to the cross, then through the cross to the empty tomb, what does Jesus dying on the cross say to you? How does Jesus dying on a cross save you?

Have you ever looked at the cross of Christ and called it foolishness? Then by the power of the Holy Spirit have you ever changed your mind, and called the cross the symbol of your salvation?

Are you open to faith, yet still struggle with the foolishness of the cross?

While there are many different theories of atonement, theories on the reason Christ died on the cross, remember that they all tell a love story, a story of God’s foolish love for us, whereby Christ died to remove the stain of sin and death from our lives.

Remember that they all tell a love story, a story of God’s redemptive love that continues to call to us even when we don’t feel deserving of God’s love. We are called to respond to such a love story with faith, to trust that God is God and Jesus is God’s beloved Son, and through Jesus’ death and resurrection our sins are forgiven by God, not by anything we did but only by God’s abundant grace.

We are called to respond to such a love story through belief, believing Jesus is God’s Son who died for your sins and for mine, and in response to such great love we in turn are called to love others.

We are called to respond to such a love story through action, through living in such a way that Christ’s death and resurrection transforms our lives, our words, our actions so that others see God through us. In a few weeks the scripture will ask us not only to believe in the cross, but to take up our crosses.

The challenge for the church in Corinth then, and often for us here today, is that while we believe in the good news of Jesus’ death for our sins, we often don’t allow such good news to shape us. The message of the cross influences more than just what we believe. The message of the cross also influences how we behave.

How do we live out who God has gifted and called us to be?

Do we strive for success as defined by the world, with all the power, money and authority that the world looks upon as good, or do we strive for success as defined by God, living by God’s wisdom and grace, sharing hope and practical help, finding our identity not in what we own but in whose we are?

How do we live as God’s community in this world, shaped by the power of the cross? How do we live forgiving one another? How do we live accepting one another despite diverse backgrounds and current realities?

“The early church thrived in the Roman world because it continued to live the life of the cross despite ridicule, censure and persecution (Acts 2:42-47). In a world that's becoming ever more divisive, even within the church, the sign of the cross must once again become the sign that reminds us that it's not about us, but about what God has done for us in Christ. The cross is the sign that allows us to drop our pretentions of individual strength and invites us to become part of a community whose strength is always found in weakness.”

--“The Sign of the Cross” 3-8-15 homileticsonline.com

Friends, we are messengers of the foolish love of God, messengers of the good news of the cross, messengers of the good news of the empty tomb, messengers of the good news of God’s presence with us here and now.

As we continue in the journey of Lent, may we prayerfully ponder what the cross means to us, and how to live as messengers of the cross in a world that calls us fools.

May God’s love and grace, power and wisdom guide us on our journey.