

SERMON TITLE: “A Fool’s Hope”
TEXT: 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25
PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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Last Sunday Doug talked about “narrow choices.” He talked about how the life of discipleship is a life of choosing, and how in choosing, we are being formed into an instrument of blessing, something that can hold good for those around us and for the world.

So this theme of choice has been with me all week. This is, in many ways, the guiding theme for us during Lent. We must *choose* where or with whom we will sign.

What I spent a good deal of time this week thinking about—specifically in the context of today’s text from 1 Corinthians about the “foolishness” of the Christian message—is the *motivations* behind many of the choices that we make.

Why do we choose what we choose?

This past week, I attended the funeral of a friend of mine that I have known since grade school who tragically lost a four-year battle with cancer.

I saw a lot of people I hadn’t seen for quite a while, and of course, events like these trigger the memory and bring me back to school days growing up in Coaldale.

When we are in junior high or high school, our choices are often based almost entirely upon what is popular, aren’t they.

We only wear what will be approved of by others, we don’t listen to the “wrong” music, we try to go to the right parties with the right people, we try not to say and do things that will be out of step with the prevailing orthodoxies of the day.

High school can seem like one enormous exercise in posturing!

So can the rest of life.

As adults, how do we think about whom we will associate with? Or the views we hold about the world, be it political or social concerns or whatever? Or our religious views?

Of course, we like to think that the ways in which we think about the world simply reflect what is right and true—of course! But I wonder if our views on such things are *in any way* determined by how they will make *us* look.

What will so and so think if they know that I support ___? What would my co-workers say if they knew that I devote a good chunk of my time to ___? What would my

classmates or teammates think if they knew that I believed ___? What would those that I worship with each week say if they knew that I didn't believe ___ or had questions about ___?

Whether in high school or in the rest of life, we don't really like to be thought of as foolish or behind the times or naïve or intellectually unsophisticated do we?

In the first century city of Corinth, as today, there were plenty of people who thought they were wise, plenty of posturing, plenty of "accepted" and "acceptable" things that you could believe and do.

Corinth was a 4000 year-old city by the time Paul arrived there! It had been conquered and destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC and lay in ruins for over a century. It was refounded in 44 BC as a colony for retired veterans of the Roman legion.

Corinth was a port city—a hub of economic activity, sexually permissive, a lot of upwardly mobile people, and lots of ethnic, intellectual, and religious diversity.

For the Jewish citizens of Corinth, the cross would have been offensive because Messiahs don't die. They conquer oppressors (i.e., Rome) and vindicate God's people. They rule with the strength and authority of YHWH himself! This is what the Jewish people were anticipating.

A crucified Messiah, who voluntarily lays his life down as the ultimate display of power, as the ultimate exposing of human violence and corruption, was not on their radar.

For the Greek citizens of Corinth, the cross would have also been offensive. The Greeks valued wisdom and rationality, and the cross is nothing if not completely irrational. Greek gods don't die. They fight with honour and strength.

This is why Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 1:22-23,

²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

Paul is, in essence, saying to the Corinthian church—a church which was divisive and immoral and confused in a wide variety of ways—you all think you are wise, in your own way, but God's way of working in the world, God's way of rescuing and redeeming his world, is completely different than any of you expect!

All of your posturing, all of your hierarchies, and descriptors of who gets it and who doesn't—throw them out. God's wisdom looks different.

A stumbling block for the Jews, foolishness to the Greeks... What about to Canadians?

Are we any more prepared to accept God's "foolish" way of working in the world? What does it mean to embrace the foolishness of the cross?"

Perhaps a good place to start is with what it *doesn't* mean.

It does not mean that we are to somehow seek to be stupid or silly, or that we are to celebrate irrational beliefs.

When I was a kid, I sometimes got the impression that "embracing the foolishness of the cross" meant that life was kind of like a test: I was supposed to cling to "ridiculous" religious beliefs as tightly as I could and for as long as I could, and in exchange God would reward me eternal life when I died.

But this is not what Paul is talking about in our text this morning.

I don't think that Paul is in any way celebrating foolishness in and of itself—as if God had some kind of interest in human beings believing strange facts about the world!

Rather—and this is the important point—I think what Paul is saying, in an ironic way, is that in Christ, God is subverting and reorienting our conceptions of wisdom and strength.

After all, our world has seen enough of "real" strength and power and wisdom, hasn't it? From the beginning of human history down to the present, human "wisdom" hasn't exactly fared so well has it? The utopia we all long for, the peace and security that has been the object of all of the wars and violence and jostling for power and influence and intellectual arrogance and doctrinal certainty throughout history has not arrived.

A famous saying attributed to Albert Einstein goes something like this: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." One could argue that this is the history of humanity writ large.

This is why we need a bit of divine foolishness. Human wisdom doesn't exactly have a shining record!

The foolishness Paul speaks of is not a determination to believe some really unlikely things about the world; rather, it is a foolishness that judges and exposes our "wisdom."

It shows us that the things that we consider wise and rational and sure may be a good way of explaining and maintaining the status quo, but they are not how the world is made new.

It's important that we understand the difference.

The “foolishness of the cross” is not a way of saying that our task in life is to hang on to some really strange beliefs. **This would leave our categories for understanding wisdom and foolishness unchallenged.**

Rather, it is a way of saying that our conceptions of what strength and power look like are askew and in need of being corrected.

What Paul is saying in this passage on “foolishness,” is that it is our categories that require correcting. We are invited to see clearly, to see things as they really are.

N.T. Wright puts it like this in his commentary on this passage:

[Paul puts things this way] to make the point with stunning rhetorical effect: God’s folly is wiser than humans, and God’s weakness is stronger than humans... The Christian good news is all about God dying on a rubbish-heap at the wrong end of the Empire. It’s all about God babbling nonsense to a room full of philosophers. It’s all about the true God confronting the world of posturing, power, and prestige, and overthrowing it in order to set up his own kingdom, a kingdom in which the weak and the foolish find themselves just as welcome as the strong and the wise, if not more so.

Today, on this third Sunday of Lent, our text invites us to “sign up” for God’s “foolish” way of working in the world.

Like everything else in the Christian life, signing up for the “foolishness of God” will likely be something we do again and again throughout our lives. It takes time to learn to see clearly, to see things as they really are, after all.

But it is possible. I saw a glimpse of it in a story I came across this week.

How many of you are familiar with the KONY 2012 video that went viral this week? It is a campaign that seeks to mobilize a massive social media campaign to spur governments to capture and eliminate Lord’s Resistance Army leader Joseph Kony.

I am not going to address the merits of the campaign itself. What I want to share is an article that I came across this week that I think demonstrates a more “foolish” approach to the problem of Joseph Kony.

This is from a blog post by Jonathan Wilson Hartgrove:

Is it possible to respond to Kony with the power of Jesus’ nonviolent love?

For me, this is not a speculative question. I know the answer is “yes” because I have met her. Her name is Angelina Atyam.

In northern Uganda, 139 children were abducted from their local school by the Lord's Resistance Army in 1996. Among them was the 14-year old daughter of Angelina Atyam, a local midwife and nurse. Atyam knew she would never see her daughter again. Thousands of parents before her had bitterly resigned themselves to a brutal reality that could not be changed. She had every reason to be angry, but little room to hope that anything could change.

Still, Atyam could not remain silent. This was her daughter, after all, abducted and abused along with other young women whom she had helped welcome into the world. She knew she had to do something. Her sense of urgency was every bit as strong as that of the KONY 2012 Campaign. But her approach was different.

Atyam founded the Concerned Parents Association, seeking the release of the children while at the same time advocating a different approach to their captors. **"Our message is unconditional forgiveness and reconciliation,"** she said. "We have absolutely forgiven them. We can turn to a fresh page; we do it for the sake of the children who are alive." She continued, "I have waited more than three years; some parents even longer. We are tired of war and our children need a better life. Of revenge I would say that we cannot throw petrol on a burning fire; otherwise we would be like them. We can say this because we have been at the center of the pain."

Atyam was relentless in her love, speaking out against Kony on radio and in print. When he sent threats, she did not waver. Finally, he sent a message to say that he would release her daughter if she would stop her campaign against him. "They are all my children," she said. "I will not stop until they are all released."

Eventually, they were. But the power of Atyam's story is not in the conclusion that "it worked." It's in a faith that knew love was possible, even when evil seemed overwhelming. When I met Atyam several years ago, I asked her how she knew to hold on. "I got down on my knees every night and said the Lord's Prayer," she told me. "...forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us..." I knew I had to keep praying."

Yes, we are more creative than cynical apathy or violent intervention. We are more creative because we've been invited to pray a prayer that's not ours and live a life that has power beyond our capacity to imagine.

The foolishness of God, in action. This is a fool's hope.

Our choices are far less dramatic. But in our day-to-day lives, we, too, can participate in the “foolish” way of God in the world. Every time we choose

- the way of forgiveness
- the way of suffering
- the way of identifying with the weak and the forgotten,
- the way of placing the needs of others ahead of our own,
- the way of refusing to retaliate when wronged

... we are testifying to the power of God’s upside down way of working in the world.

Every time we share the good news, in word and deed, that we can be set free from the posturing that comprises so much of our lives, and embrace the God who, **in the supreme act of foolishness, voluntarily gave himself up for the life of the world**, we are pointing to the foolishness that is wiser than human wisdom.

All of us have opportunities to give evidence that we have signed up for the “foolishness” that is wiser than human wisdom, the “weakness” that is stronger than human strength.

May God help us to embrace the fool’s hope of the gospel, and in so doing, to begin to see and to live more clearly and more truly, into lives that have power beyond our capacity to imagine.

Amen.