

The Message of the Cross: Foolishness

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

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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. For it is written,

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

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I know that Presbyterians are all about moderation, but I need to confess that I have been on a binge of late. The third season of House of Cards was released about a month ago, and Lindsey and I have spent too many of those precious hours between the kids’ bedtime and our own plowing through the episodes. We have one left. Please – if you have seen it, don’t tell me anything about how it ends!

House of Cards is a political drama that tells the story of Frank and Claire Underwood – two of the most disgusting, power-hungry, cold, calculating, and interesting characters you will meet in a political drama. Frank Underwood (who is played by Kevin Spacey) is supposed to be from Gaffney, South Carolina – even though you might not believe it based on Kevin Spacey’s poor excuse for a southern accent.

At present in the show we have seen Frank and Claire climb the political ladder all the way to the oval office, where Frank is the President of the United States and Claire is the Ambassador to the United Nations. It is what they had to do to get there that makes the show interesting and nauseating.

The show is dark. Honestly, there have been times when I wondered why I was watching it. I think the reason Frank and Claire Underwood have me in their grip is because their characters provide me a safe way to experience what happens to a person when their lives are completely consumed by a thirst for power and control and success. And one of the things I have learned about that thirst is that it masks for a fear of being weak, and insignificant, and alone.

There is one scene from this season where Frank wades into the waters of faith. In the middle of the night, he asks to see a minister to talk about some of his struggles. Standing in a church, Frank says the minister, "I understand [the picture] of God that is focused on absolute power and using that power to control the people, but Jesus I just don't get." The minister responds, "we don't really believe in absolute power. We believe in two rules only: loving God and loving one another." When the minister leaves the sanctuary, Frank stays behind and walks, mockingly up to the cross. "If love is what you're selling," he snarls, "I'm not buying it."

Do you buy it?

Oh, I know we all say we do when are in here on Sunday morning. But what happens when we leave these doors and head out into the world?

One of the reasons I enjoy – if that is even the right word – watching Frank and Claire Underwood's story is because it helps me confront a reality that we share more of the same motivations than I care to admit: a desire for success, and achievement, and control. A fear of failure. A need for self-preservation.

The stuff that is baked into us by the culture in which we live.

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The message of the cross is foolish to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

One of the great theologians of the last century, H. Richard Niehbur, drew a distinction between the logic of survival and the logic of the cross.

The logic of survival makes sense to the Frank Underwoods of the world – to those who for all of their toughness and bravado, are really just scared because they understand that they are perishing...they are afraid of the reality that one day, all of this will be over.

The logic of cross is different. As Niebuhr says, "the cross does not deny the reality of death. It reinforces it. [What the cross does] is deny death's finality."¹

When we look at the cross we are confronted with a choice:

¹ As quoted by Adam Eckhart in *Feasting on the Word*, Pastoral Perspective, p. 86.

Will we choose to live as those who are perishing or will we live as those who are being saved?

Will we live as those who are perishing – as those who define our lives by the fear that what we see is what we get and so we might as well get what we can while we can –

Or will we live as those who are being saved...who know that a life lived according to the logic of the survival of the fittest only denies the reality that God is at work beyond and outside of this life and its limitations.

It is a stark choice.

On the one hand there are rewards and the feeling of power and influence and immediate comforts.

On the other there is weakness and powerlessness and pain.

How foolish it sounds to choose the latter.

And how telling is it that the logic of the cross sounds so foolish?

Will we live as those who are perishing, or will we live as those who are being saved?

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The reality is that it is easy for us to believe that we are perishing.

Daily, we are confronted with headline after headline that we interpret as threat. There are dangerous people in our world. There are tensions that are far from being resolved.

Our bodies betray us – with age and disease.

The fabric of our community is strained – with a growing distance between those who have resources and those who do not, and schools that are increasingly separate and unequal.

Following the logic of the cross does not make all of these things go away – the Christian faith is not Pollyanna. Let's not forget that the cross was the way that Jesus experienced the brokenness and the hard reality of the world. But the cross also shows us that there is more to the story.

Another reason it is easy for us to believe that we are perishing is that we are living in the midst of a season of tremendous change. A friend of mine, Stacy Johnson, a

professor of theology at Princeton Seminary says that in ways that are almost unique in human history, we are faced with “a tsunami of change.”²

We feel that change in our world – as the world grows flatter and we find ourselves navigating more complexities.

We feel that change with our children – whose assumptions about the future and their place in it look different than ours did at their age.

We feel that change in the church – where a lot of our assumptions about what church looks like, and how much influence we have in the culture, and even – now – what it means that some of our long-held definitions are in flux.

The reason that “adaptive leadership” is so en vogue is that that is what it will take for us to navigate from where we are to where we are going. And, for many of us, this change and these adaptations are a further example of how we are perishing.

Yet, while not all change is good, some of it is...so how will we approach it as people of faith and how we will know the difference?

As Stacy Johnson says, change and the gospel are not always in opposition. “What we have to understand is that the gospel is more than a fixed set beliefs – rather the gospel is an unfolding drama. It is the story of God for us, Christ with us, and the Spirit among us.”

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Will we live as those who are perishing, or we will live as those who are being saved?

Will we allow ourselves to have our life and our faith defined only by the world that we see – with its threats, and its sin, and its fear – or will we give ourselves over to the logic of the cross that opens for us a new reality that might inform the lives we lead?

When I was a child, the person who helped open up the new reality of God’s future to me was CS Lewis and his series on the Chronicles of Narnia. More recently, another British author created a series that helps to illustrate the point – JK Rowling. I have a good friend, the Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana who preached a sermon series a few years ago on the “Gospel according to Harry Potter.” I want to share a part of one of her sermons about today’s passage with you now. The sermon was called “Prayer and Other Defenses against the Dark Arts.”

² I am grateful for Stacy Johnson’s lecture at the 2012 NEXT Church conference on this passage. It has had a profound impact on how I understand the gospel and the church. Stacy is a professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary.

MaryAnn writes: One [strategy] in the defense against the dark arts is a tool against a sort of bogeyman character called a boggart. A boggart is a shape-shifter—it takes the form of whatever the person fears most, which means that the boggart looks different to every person.

The incantation (or spell) against a boggart is the word “Ridikulus!” But while one is saying Ridikulus, one must imagine something funny, something that makes the person laugh.

For example, one of the characters – a student named Neville Longbottom, confronts his boggart in the feared Professor Snape. When challenged to use the incantation, Neville squeaks out “Ridikulus!” and Professor Snape is shown to be wearing Neville’s grandmother’s clothes and carrying her handbag.

What could possibly make someone laugh in the midst of the fear? How can we stare into the face of what terrifies us and see it as something absurd rather than frightening?

We can do this if we know that, while the fear is very real to us, it is not ultimately true. That is what it means to live as those who are being saved. What is true is what Paul will write to the church at Rome: that there is nothing, not death, nor evil, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor dementors, nor boggarts, that will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, who has already and will again declare victory over all the darkness and evil we might experience or concoct.

The Presbyterian preacher and professor Tom Long shares a story about the city of Atlanta during the civil rights movement—how the Ku Klux Klan would often march down Auburn Avenue, which was the African-American center of town. Each time the people would see the Klan coming they would draw their shades, lock their doors, and cower in their homes until that parade of evil was over.

At least, that is what they would do until the mid 1960s when the Civil Rights Movement started to take hold.

Just when the tide was starting to turn, when people could finally see justice on the horizon, the Klan marched once again down Auburn Avenue. But this time the people lifted their window shades, threw open their doors, stood on the sidewalk, and they laughed, and laughed, and laughed... and the Klan never marched down Auburn Avenue again.³

They looked evil in the face and said, Ridiculous. And they did that because they lived – not as those who were perishing – but as those who were being saved.

³ Dana, MaryAnn McKibben (The Well, 2009, Austin, TX)

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