

4th Sunday after the Epiphany 1/29/17
1 Corinthians 1:18–31 A

WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED, A STUMBLING BLOCK TO JEWS AND FOLLY TO GENTILES, BUT TO THOSE ARE CALLED, BOTH JEWS AND GREEKS, CHRIST THE POWER OF GOD AND THE WISDOM OF GOD.

I have a confession to make this morning -- and it may not be what you want to hear from your pastor -- because it's about telling people about Jesus. No, I have no hesitancy about telling people about Jesus; in fact, I enjoy it. The problem is that it seems when I tell someone about Jesus, nothing seems to happen.

When I was in high school, I invited my friends to come to church. In college, I had any number of discussions with people about Jesus – some who were Christians who had different beliefs than us Lutherans, and some with people who were devout atheists. Now, I tell someone about Jesus -- I think I can say every day of my life; often people who were baptized into Christ, confessed Christ at their confirmation, whose name still appears on the membership list of an LCMS congregation.

More often than not, they chat politely with me. Some become angry; a few, in fact, become quite angry. But when our conversation is over, they were no closer to confessing Christ as their Lord and Savior than when our conversation started. I tell people about Jesus, but nothing seems to happen. And honestly, I feel guilty about that.

As if that's not bad enough, I will hear a story like when someone boarded a one-hour flight and, by the time they reached the baggage claim area, they had a fellow passenger weeping in repentance and filled with joy that Jesus had died for them. Honestly, this sort of thing has never really happened to me.

What about you? Have you ever felt guilty because you have tried to tell someone about Jesus and nothing seemed to happen? Maybe you feel inadequate because you didn't know enough Bible passages, or lack eloquence in your choice of words, or you don't know enough clever arguments, or you're just embarrassed by Jesus. Maybe you brought your children to Sunday School, and the Christmas program, and Catechism, and now they want nothing to do with the Lord's Church, perhaps they do not even believe in God anymore.

If you feel that way, the Apostle Paul has some good news for you in today's epistle: "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles". With these words, Paul teaches us that some people will hear about Jesus and not care ... some people will even be offended when you tell them about Jesus.

You know the Great Commission, right? "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20a). That "all" things that Jesus commands us to teach is a stumbling block and folly to the sinful flesh.

Have you ever talked to a Muslim about Jesus? Islam is a religion that asks you to die for their god. Look at the number of Muslims who have died for Allah. When you confess Jesus to a Muslim, it seems utterly foolish, weak, and lowly. It is foolishness that God would take on human flesh and humble Himself unto death, even death on a cross. To Muslims, it is a stumbling block that God would die for us people.

Or how about, saying that you believe God created Adam and Eve and everything, and that evolution is a myth. Or that marriage is the

lifelong union of one man and one woman, and that same-sex unions are not God's will. Or that abortion stops a beating heart. Or maybe you've had a conversation with a fellow Christian about Jesus, about how even babies need to come to Jesus in baptism because they need what baptism gives. Or, that Holy Communion is not just bread and wine, but the true body and blood of Jesus, in which He gives us forgiveness, life, and salvation. These are the "all things" that Jesus commands us to teach, yet they are folly and a stumbling block.

And, the Bible tells us why. St. Paul Himself writes, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). And again, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot" (Ro 8:17).

Note Paul's words in our lesson, "It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" (v. 21b). These words teach us that it is God who saves. Paul even applies the word "folly" to the things we preach so that we understand that it is not what we do, but what God does, that saves.

Martin Luther explains this very well in the Small Catechism, in the 3rd Article of the Apostles' Creed:

"I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the one true faith."

Romans 10:17 teaches us, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ". God the Holy Spirit to use the spoken Word

and the visible Word of the Sacraments to create faith in Jesus, so that we trust, rejoice, and find comfort in Him alone.

We do that because it is Jesus who has won the victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil. The Son of God took on full humanity in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. He actively humbled Himself under the law and fulfilled all of the law for us. Then He passively endured the punishment we deserved as He allowed mere men to nail Him to a cross. After He had suffered the full punishment for our sin, He died and His friends laid Him in a tomb.

Rejoice and be glad, Dear Child of God, your sin is gone through the foolishness of Jesus dying on a cross outside the city of Jerusalem.

Jesus rose from the grave the 3rd day and taught His disciples for forty days after He rose. Sometime during those forty days, Jesus appeared to His disciples

“and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem’” (Lk 24:46-47).

This proclamation of repentance and the forgiveness of sins is the foolishness of God that is wiser than men, and the weakness of God that is stronger than men.

When Christ and Him crucified are proclaimed, great things do happen. Yes, it may seem to our human reason and senses that nothing happens, but the fact that you are here this morning, hungering and thirsting for the righteousness of Christ, that you are bring your children to Sunday School and Catechism, that you are praying with your family is a living witness to the truth of God’s Word,

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Is 55:10-11).

Wherever Christ crucified is proclaimed, there is God the Holy Spirit,
working through the Word, and Water, and Bread and Wine, to forgive sins,
give and strengthen faith, and give us comfort and assurance in Jesus, and
yes, that is a most wondrous thing!