

The Two Ways of Wisdom

Paul was trying to make it easy for them. “You have two choices,” Paul is telling the church of God that is in Corinth, a church that was struggling in a number of ways. (And what church isn’t these days?) “There is the wisdom that will lead to your salvation, and the wisdom that will lead to your death.” (“Oh, that’s easy. I’ll choose salvation!”) There is the wisdom that makes sense, and the wisdom that doesn’t.” (“Yep, I’ll take the wisdom that makes sense!”) “There is wisdom based on pragmatism, and wisdom based on foolishness. (“Pretty clear which wisdom is the best one there!”) There is the wisdom of the world, and the wisdom of the cross.” “Wait, what?”

It’s hard for us, in the year 2022, to fully get Paul’s irony. The cross is something we display inside and outside our church buildings, project on our walls, wear around our necks. Something to be proud of, a status symbol. But for the people of Paul’s day, both Jews and Greeks, the cross was something to be ashamed of. To be more specific, the cross was a form of execution used by the mighty Roman empire, reserved only for the lowliest of the lowly, the most heinous criminals. It was undoubtedly the slowest and most painful way to die. It was a way of saying to the world, “You see this man? He got what he deserved. You better watch out, or you’ll end up just like him.”

For the Jews, to propose that their Messiah, the holy Son of God, was executed on a Roman cross, was the absolute worst way of taking his name in vain. To say the words “Christ crucified,” was to utter the vilest profanity possible. (And we can think of some pretty vile profanities.)

But for Paul, the words “Christ crucified” or “The cross of Christ,” or simply “the cross” was a code word for the greatest “achievement” imaginable. The greatest “victory” in the history of the human world. Which he will tell the Corinthians later is nothing less than the victory of life over death.

But at this point in his letter, Paul is telling the believers in Corinth that you don’t choose the cross for its greatness. You choose it precisely for its weakness.

What did it mean for the Corinthians, and what does it mean for us, to choose the cross? It means to give up control completely, by letting God be in control. It means to choose a life of service rather than a life of success, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. C’mon. Why would anybody want to do that? To give up precisely those things that make us great in the eyes of the world?

Paul says why. He says that “*God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is strong than human strength.*” You want proof, he says? Look at me. I used to be a man of power and prestige, a highly respected Pharisee. And now I’m hated and hunted by the world. And some of you criticize me and laugh at me because I don’t always “talk so good,” I don’t always sound eloquent. And I say, good! Because it’s not about me.

And look at you. I mean, what a tiny, rag-tag group of people. Some of you don’t have college degrees, let alone graduate degrees that give you all those letters. Some of you used to be slaves, for God’s sake. No status in the world whatsoever. And yet God called you.

Some of you do have worldly status, of course. And wealth; some of you are quite wealthy (although you don't like to admit it). Some of you are quite talented. And smart.

But here's the thing. You like to be right. You like to talk more than you like to listen. You like to boast—of your forebears, of your education, maybe even of your last name, of your so-called wisdom. Don't boast. Any of you. Because Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, sacrificed his life on the cross for each one of you. If you're going to boast about anything, boast about that. Boast about how much God loves you, no matter how messed up you are. Boast how you don't deserve God's love. Hallelujah! To God be the glory, great things he has done!

You have two choices. Choose the wisdom of the cross, rather than the wisdom of the world. Because that is where you will find the Son of God.

I've been thinking a lot about these two "ways of wisdom," this past week, and about what makes them different from one another—how we can tell them apart. And I started putting together a list. This morning I want to simply read my list to you. And in the days to come I invite you to add to it.

There is wisdom that leads to recognition, and wisdom that leads to shame.

There is wisdom that earns money; and wisdom that loses money, perhaps by giving it away.

There is wisdom that will be cheered by the crowds; and wisdom that will be booed in derision.

There is wisdom based on strength; and wisdom based on weakness.

There is wisdom acquired through years of study; and wisdom that comes with no letters after your name (like BA, or DMA, or MDiv).

There is wisdom that leads to great success; and wisdom that looks like abject failure.

There is wisdom that wins arguments; and wisdom that lets others win them.

There is wisdom for winners; and wisdom for losers.

There is wisdom you go to school for; and wisdom you go to church for.

There is wisdom that lasts for centuries; and wisdom that lasts forever.

There is wisdom that leads only to death; and a wisdom that leads to life.

There is wisdom that sounds eloquent; and wisdom that sounds like gibberish.

There is wisdom that will be admired; and wisdom that will be despised.

There is the wisdom of the strong; and there is the wisdom of the weak.

There is wisdom based on certainty; and wisdom based only on a trembling faith.

There is the wisdom that comes with pride; and the wisdom that comes from humility.

There is the wisdom that climbs; and the wisdom that descends.

There is a wisdom that wears a crown of gold; and a wisdom that wears a crown of thorns.

We have two choices. May we choose the cross, as foolish and horrific and counter-cultural and even as confusing as it sounds. May God help us to understand more fully what that means.

Amen.