

13 October 2019

Counter-Cultural Wisdom

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

We complete our sermon series on the counter-cultural teachings of our faith by moving to one of Paul's letters, 1 Corinthians 1, verses 18-25:

¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹For it is written,

*'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'*

²⁰Where 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? ²¹For 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. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

For five weeks now we have been looking at some of the counter-cultural, even counter-intuitive, teachings of Jesus. We have learned that true happiness is to be found in emptying ourselves for the sake of others, that true wealth come from using our resources for others' needs, that what is important in the eyes of God is humble service to the least among us, and that the Christ-like response to insult and hatred is forbearance and love. Now, all these assignments Jesus left with us have to do with actions – with what we *do* – and there's a reason for that. That's where Jesus started, too. He talked almost entirely about behavior, not about ideas. But as we wrap up today, I want to look at the counter-cultural things that Christians think and believe.

Because our doctrine is counter-cultural, too. As Paul makes clear in the reading you just heard, in his day Christian teaching was rejected on all sides. The Jews rejected it as false ("a stumbling block") and the Greeks thought it was just nonsense. People with education – whether that was Jewish rabbinical education or Greek philosophical training – all considered Christianity bosh. The teachings that were problems were invariably the ones about the nature and work of Jesus Christ, specifically these three: that Jesus was the Son of God in human form, that through his death on the cross he somehow repaired humanity's relationship with God, and that on the third day he rose from the dead. If Christianity could have just jettisoned those three doctrines, we coulda been contenders. There were both Jews and Greeks who were drawn to the teachings of Jesus. There was a group of Jewish Christians called the Ebionites that were happy to say that Jesus was the Messiah, but who balked at the whole Son of God thing. Among the Greek Neo-Platonists, there were many who loved the story of Jesus and were happy to fit him into their philosophy as an emanation of eternal divinity, but who cringed at the crude, ignorant notion that the divine had taken on flesh. Both groups would have loved to join Christianity if we would have dropped just one offensive doctrine.

But already by the book of 1 Corinthians, one of the earliest books in the New Testament, we see Paul steadfastly refusing to give ground. No, this is who Jesus was, this is what happened when he died, and this is what happened next: he is risen. Go ahead and call it nonsense, he says; this nonsense is what we believe. And over the ensuing centuries, that same nonsense has continued to define Christian teaching.

Now I have to admit it wasn't always counter-cultural. From the fall of Rome until around 1500, our Christian teaching was not really a stumbling block, at least in Europe. When the Roman Empire went tail over teakettle, it was the Church that held civilization together, and so for a time our doctrine was not counter-cultural. It *was* the culture. But starting around 1500, through the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, the Church's core teachings began to be called into question, as they had been in Paul's time. As science explained more and more, the realm of "miracle" grew smaller. And, as more "miracles" were explained by science, many educated people have come to the conclusion that all miracles are nonsense. We Christians, therefore, who claim to believe in things that cannot be explained by science, are just self-deluding simpletons, which takes us right back to where Paul was. Our faith is a stumbling block to some and nonsense to others. What we believe is counter-cultural again.

Now please don't think I'm rejecting the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution. I'm not. After a thousand years of having everything her own way, the Church needed a solid kick in the pants, forcing us to re-evaluate our assumptions. Frankly, a lot of the Christian teaching that developed during those years is pretty cringe-worthy and needed to be challenged. It is good that we have been forced to rethink scripture, to question the church's cultural assumptions about race and women and homosexuality. It's good that we don't burn witches anymore. Can I get an Amen on that? We have Science and Reason to thank for all those good things. But what does all this mean for those original three Christian convictions that Paul and the early church clung to so tenaciously, despite their rejection by the educated of the first century? Do we still believe that Jesus was God in the flesh? That through his death, somehow, we have been restored to God? And that he rose from the grave?

I have to admit that some of the church has not held on to those traditional teachings as tightly as did the early church. We liberal Protestants have sometimes seemed embarrassed by our own faith. Often, we have quietly hushed up all that illogical God-becoming-flesh business, preferring to talk about Jesus as a great teacher, and really isn't that all that matters? We usually ignore all that stuff about how Jesus' death brought us forgiveness from sins, partly because we don't really like to talk about sin at all. It's so, you know, depressing. We prefer positive thoughts about our own god-self within. As for the resurrection story – well, we shouldn't take it literally. It's better to think of it as a metaphor for the rising of the true, pure spiritual self that is within each of us. And in such manner, we have often distanced ourselves from the things that used to define us, and have quietly swept all those un-scientific supernaturalist beliefs under the rug, trusting in science for everything important and treating our faith as a harmless hobby for "spiritual" people. As the great preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick once put it, "We have sometimes acted as if it were the greatest compliment that could be given to Almighty God that a few scientists still believe in Him."

Let me speak just for myself now. I still believe those impossible things – that Jesus Christ was God made flesh, that his becoming one of us to the point of death has brought healing to our relationship with God, and that that gardener that Mary saw in the garden that day really

was the Risen Lord. There are those who would ask, “But isn’t that nonsense?” To which I reply, “Of course it’s nonsense. If I could explain it, I wouldn’t have to *believe* it, would I?” I believe in a God that is beyond our ability to understand or explain, and that for some reason that God loves us – God knows why, because none of us are much to write home about – and because of that love, God has done something unfathomable. God joined us. Lived as one of us. Died as one of us. Then rose again, a pioneer toward eternity. I really do believe that stuff.

And furthermore, I believe that those things still define Christianity, that without those impossible things, it’s sort of meaningless to call ourselves *Christian*. Polite liberal churches that don’t really believe those things might look around for a more accurate name, like “Society of Very Moral People who Volunteer at Food Pantries and Recycle,” or something. For me, though, that’s not enough. I want the impossible.

I know that not all of you agree with me. We have different experiences and different minds. For me, believing in the resurrection is child’s play compared to loving enemies, but that doesn’t mean everyone is like me. For some of you, believing impossible things really may be impossible. I suspect that’s fine with God. Somewhere along the way, many Christians got the notion that believing specific points of doctrine is what matters to God. I don’t see that anywhere in scripture. There is no indication that we will have to score a certain percentage on a doctrine quiz to join the heavenly banquet. There is every indication that what matters to God is how we treat others, especially the weak. That’s the part that’s non-negotiable; not our doctrine.

But what we believe does matter in one way. In my own life, there was a time when I questioned all the impossible doctrines, when I really preferred the Jesus-was-just-a-great-teacher-who-got-killed story. But then I realized why I preferred it. That version of Jesus doesn’t make any demands of me. If he was just a human teacher, I can follow his teachings as far as I want, and then stop. If I don’t like something he says I can decide that that bit wasn’t actually said by the historical Jesus and move on to something more to my taste. Or I can just ignore it and look to some other human teacher. What does Deepak Chopra say here? But if Jesus is really who the Christian church claims, his example is not take-it-or-leave-it. We actually do have to empty ourselves for others, live generously, love the unlovable, even those who hurt us or hate us. It is *because* I believe the counter-cultural impossible notion that Jesus was God that I have to pay attention to those other counter-cultural impossible tasks he set for us.

Here I stand. I can do no other.