

The Wisdom of God

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

A story is told about a wealthy early colonial Virginian who asked his Anglican rector if it was possible to find salvation outside of the Church of England. The rector wrestled with the question, because he knew it was within the realm of possibility that those who were not Anglican might go to heaven, but he did not want his socially elite parishioner to be socializing with Christian riffraff of all sorts. So after pondering the question deeply, the rector replied, "Sir, the possibility about which you inquire exists. But no gentleman would avail himself of it." The social reality reflected in this story is not unique. The truth is that status consciousness afflicts most religious groups. Sociologists from Emile Durkheim to H. Richard Niebuhr have noticed how often religious affiliations are directly related to social and economic class.

Status consciousness appears to have been one of the many problems afflicting the church at Corinth, as we can surmise from Paul's letter to this church—a church he had founded. The ancient Greek city in which it was located had been destroyed by Rome in 146 BCE and rebuilt by Julius Caesar about a hundred years later as a colony for freed slaves and other poor folk. So in Paul's day Corinth was a city of "upwardly mobile" folk. There was little "old money" in the town, but it was full of folk trying to "make it." These aspirations were reflected in the divisions and animosities of the church at Corinth, where members were prone to follow one leader or another in light of the social status that would then be conferred upon them.

Most of our churches reflect similar inclinations. For instance, if you were to ask a churchgoer, "Why are you a member of your particular congregation?" you

might get the answer, "I am a member of this church because it cares for the poor and the outcast." Another might say, "I attend the church of the Reverend So and So, who is a great preacher." Still another might answer, "I attend the church that speaks truth to power," or "This church promises that faith will lead to prosperity and prosperity to social success." In other words, that which conveys status or pride is often given as a reason for attending a particular church.

Flannery O'Connor tells a wonderful story about a woman named Ruby Turpin—a woman obsessed with status consciousness. In the story, Ruby entered a doctor's waiting room, sizing up everyone there in the room as to their class. In fact, at night Ruby Turpin would occupy herself by naming classes of people. On the bottom were, in her worldview, poor blacks and white trash; above them were homeowners like her and her husband Claude; and on top were people with lots of money and much bigger homes. The complexity of her rankings used to "bear in" on her, because she knew that some of those people who had lots of money were actually very "common and ought to be below she and Claude." While Mrs. Turpin was reflecting out loud on these matters in the doctor's waiting room, there happened to be a college student sitting there reading a book entitled *Human Development*, who decided she had had just about as much of Ruby Turpin as she could stand. So she hurled the book across the room, hitting Mrs. Turpin just above the left eye, and then began to strangle her, saying, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old warthog!"

In many respects, Paul's words to the people of Corinth are no less jolting than a book on human development between the eyes, for he reminds them of the foolishness of the gospel of the crucified Christ. You see, crucifixion was more than state-sponsored execution; it was meant to demean and shame the victim. Indeed, it may have been embarrassing to the early Christians that their Lord had met his fate by crucifixion. However, New Testament scholar Robert Jewett, in his

interpretation of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, argues that by enduring a shameful death, the crucified one "overcomes our shame by letting us experience the boundless love of God.... Christ takes the ultimate weight of shame to lift our heaviest and most secret burden, the feeling that no one loves and respect us." In other words, facing into the foolishness of the gospel of the crucified Christ removes the burden of our shameful feelings about ourselves, enabling us to see the foolishness of our inclination to shame others.

So what happened to Ruby Turpin? Later that evening she went into the pasture beside her house and was talking to herself, puzzling with great intensity over the reason for the assault on her obvious goodness and respectability. She stood there gazing into the evening sky until there was only a purple streak cutting across the sky like an extension of highway. Then, in a revelatory moment, she saw it as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth and on it a horde of souls was marching toward heaven. There were companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of blacks in white robes, and battalions of persons with mental illness shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. "And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claude, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. But she could tell by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away."

So also, the message of the cross can remove our inclination to shame others and invite us into a new reality of boundless love. The cross may be "foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (v.

18). Roger J. Gench

Let us hear again our scripture in light of what we know about God's wisdom and who we are in Christ:

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

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

²⁶ Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

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