

Foolish and True

1 Corinthians 1:17-34

Home Moravian Church, Feb. 1, 2026 (online only because of weather)

The apostle Paul declares that Christ sent him “to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross might not be emptied of its power.”

Eloquent or not, can the words of human beings empty the cross of its power?

Rather than make you walk through my thought processes on that question, I’m going straight to the answer I came up with: No. I like to think Paul would agree. The power of the cross comes from God, and whatever humans may do, the cross of Jesus Christ retains its power.

On the other hand, maybe what we *can* do is talk about the cross in such confusing ways that the fog of our words obscures the cross itself. And maybe that’s what Paul is getting at, in his first letter to the believers at Corinth.

I’ve said this before, and I’ll say it again: Paul had a hard job. Traveling all over his known world to build this brand-new thing that would someday be called church, Paul didn’t have a lot to support him: no powerful governments or wealthy corporate sponsors. But it wasn’t what Paul *didn’t* have that made his job hard. It was what he *did* have: people. Lots and lots of people, who, despite their intention to follow Christ, continually disrupted the communities that could help them do it.

They were, we might say, unclear on the concept of Christian community. And that’s understandable. Everything is strange, when you’re trying to build something new; and so you fall back on what’s old, the things you already know. Old rules, old structures, old habits.

One very old habit is “divide and conquer”; and the church in Corinth is doing their best, or worst, with that. In the verses just before today’s text, Paul chides the Corinthians for proclaiming allegiance to various leaders—“I belong to Apollos!” “I belong to Peter.” “I belong to Paul!” All lining up behind whoever they think is strongest, or wisest, or most eloquent—whatever quality will help their team *win church*.

Disturbed to be named a combatant in this battle, Paul tries to pull the Corinthians away from old habits into something new: the paradoxical nature of Christian faith. He tells the Corinthians: The only fight here is the fight against division. The only strength is weakness. The only wisdom is foolishness.

Are you comforted by the thought: that the only wisdom is foolishness? Imagine yourself in this new community of Christ-followers. Part of life in this community is sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with people outside the community. So maybe the reason you’re trying to line up behind the smart, eloquent apostle is because you hope that he will do the talking for you: because in the world around you, the gospel can be pretty hard to sell. And now, here comes Paul, telling you that the only wisdom is foolishness. What are you supposed to do with that?

Hey, Corinthians: *We feel you*. I mean: just listen to some of the foolishness we heard in the scriptures assigned for this Sunday. From the gospel according to Matthew, the portion we call the beatitudes:

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

Blessed are the meek? Blessed are the peacemakers? Blessed are you when people persecute you and say evil things about you falsely? In a world where it’s all about winning and the winners are the strong, this sounds like foolishness. The meek are *losers*. Peace comes through *strength*. If you’re being persecuted, it’s because you have done something *wrong*. Nothing else makes sense.

But Paul would forgive the Corinthians if they struggled with paradox. They are, after all, still spiritual infants—that’s what he’ll say in chapter 3, where he will say that he has preached only what they can process: or, as he says, feeding them milk, instead of solid food.

I don’t think Paul means he’s been dumbing down the gospel. But, given that the air in the Corinthian community is apparently thick with theological arguments, it seems likely that Paul, with simple proclamation, has just been trying to clear away the fog, so that people can really see the cross. Trying to quiet the noise, so that people can really *hear* the cross, which doesn’t need our words to convey its power. It has a sound all its own. It vibrates like a tuning fork with one clear, true note: the death of Christ for the sake of humanity.

And here’s the thing: the gospel that Paul proclaimed, in Corinth and everywhere else? It didn’t include the beatitudes. Or the parables. Or anything else from Matthew—or Mark, or Luke, or John. Most Bible scholars date Paul’s letters from about the year 49 to perhaps as late as the year 62. Mark, believed to be the earliest gospel, probably dates no farther back than the year 65, and the other three gospels followed. So what we call the gospels, Paul didn’t have in hand to preach. But everything that later Christians would learn about Jesus through the gospels,

Paul would summarize as this *gospel*: “We proclaim Christ crucified.” Gospel means “good news.” When Paul said Christ called him “to proclaim the gospel,” the good news he meant was Christ Crucified. Christ. Crucified. An innocent man dies for the sake of others. How foolish. How foolish, and how clear; clear as the note of a tuning fork, and just as true.

Now, if you’re wondering about the good news of the resurrection: Paul will get there! He will present an extended and—we have to say, it, Paul—extremely eloquent, actually *gorgeous* account of the resurrection. It will consume all of chapter 15. But in this letter of sixteen chapters, the word “raised” or “risen” or “resurrection” is nowhere *until* chapter 15. Evidently Paul means it when he says in the beginning of Chapter 2, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” Christ crucified is his foolish proclamation, which defies the wisdom of the world.

When you think about it: What’s foolish about the idea that Christ was resurrected? If we believe that God is all-powerful, there’s no reason to think that power over death is out of God’s reach. In a world where power is everything, a God that powerful makes sense. So, by that measure, resurrection makes sense. But the death of an innocent man, offering up his weakness, shamed by the powers of the earth, for the sake of others who may not even be grateful for it—that is the most foolish of proclamations.

In an interview on January 5, a current White House advisor, Stephen Miller, told CNN’s Jake Tapper, “We live in a world, in the real world ... that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world that have existed since the beginning of time.”¹ Like I said: building something new is hard, and old rules

¹ January 5, 2026, CNN. [CNN.com - Transcripts](https://www.cnn.com/transcripts)

are easy to fall back on. In a world governed by strength, force, and power, the most foolish notion of all is that a man would be weak enough to die for others.

A week ago Saturday, Alex Pretti, an ICU nurse at a veterans' hospital, attended a protest in Minneapolis. When federal agents shoved someone to the ground, Alex tried to help them to their feet and to shield them from pepper spray. The agents tackled Alex and put him on the ground, and one removed a holstered weapon Alex was carrying. Then, as Alex lay restrained and disarmed, agents pointed their weapons at him and fired multiple times. I've seen the video. I can't stop thinking of his body as he died, shivering; in my imagination it's a tiny vibration, something like a tuning fork. How foolish. How foolish, and how true.

I asked if our words can empty the cross of its power, and I think the answer is no. And if I ask whether our actions could empty the cross of its power, I still think, no. The power of the cross is not ours to control. But, just as our words might create enough confusion to obscure the cross, so might our actions. Especially if our actions around the cross contradict our words about the cross. If we profess that Jesus died for us on the cross, but fail to act as though Jesus died for everyone else, too. If we say that Jesus died to give us all new life, but then, instead of building something new, we fall back on the same old rules, the same old structures, the same old iron laws of the world that have existed since the beginning of time. The fog around the cross gets pretty thick when that happens.

The only fight here is the fight against division. The only strength is the weakness of God in human form, stronger than human strength. The only wisdom is the foolishness of God, wiser than the wisdom of the world, in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ: His sacrifice for the meek, who will inherit the earth. For the peacemakers, who will be called children of God. For those

against whom all manner of evil is uttered falsely, on Jesus' account. For those who mourn, who will be comforted. How foolish, and how true.

May we, in our mourning, be comforted; and may we rise up with faith in the power of the resurrection. Amen.