

**Fools for God**  
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*Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18*

The “foolishness of the cross.” I grew up in the Rust Belt, in the mountains of southwestern Pennsylvania. I went to school for a decade in Virginia and preached in a number of small country churches between Richmond and Charlottesville. In many of the churches I knew in those places, folks embraced the foolishness of the cross as an endorsement of simple living. They wore it as a badge of honor, along with its apparent judgment on high-intellectual-culture’s contempt for religion. For some of them, the foolishness of the cross was a defiant rejection of college-educated presumptions of superiority, of scientific skepticism of biblical authority. “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.”

With due respect to the great virtues of that simpler life in which I was raised, I don’t think Paul meant to strike an anti-intellectual note when he called the message of the cross “foolishness.” Paul was no anti-intellectual. He himself was a very intelligent man. He was highly educated in the Jewish tradition, a man of letters who invoked wisdom and literature and Hellenistic culture to explicate the meaning of the gospel he felt called to preach. The theological tradition that came from him also is one of considerable intellectual depth. Many of the so-called church fathers employed philosophical concepts to elaborate on the meanings of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. They wrote treatises so complex, so subtle, and so conceptually deep that they remain worthy intellectual adversaries to bearers of PhDs today. And they had profound effect on the evolution of western intellectual political, and moral culture beyond religion—thinkers like Augustine, Aquinas, Edwards, Kierkegaard, and King helped to shape how we think about war and virtue and science and justice.

So whatever the “foolishness” of the gospel meant to Paul, it seems unlikely that it meant a rejection of intelligence and wisdom. The Christian message is not anti-intellectual, despite being packaged that way from time to time in modern churches. Christianity does not celebrate anti-intellectualism, and neither should we. I think people have done enough of that lately, to deleterious effect.

II.

But if the foolishness of the gospel is not a rejection of intelligence and learning, then what is it? Why does Paul characterize the gospel as foolishness in the eyes of those who do not believe? Paul insists that it is the “message of the **cross**” that is foolishness to the world that will not subscribe to it. What appears as idiocy is the idea of a religious and moral worldview with crucifixion at its center. That’s the foolishness. That’s what the world doesn’t know how to handle.

But what is the message, and how is it foolishness in the eyes of the world? Paul makes clear that ultimately the gospel of the cross strikes many in the world as foolishness because it is a counter-cultural message. It's not a commentary on intelligence or education but an assertion of *values* that run counter to the ones the world often celebrates. At the center of the Church's founding story is an execution, and all of the humiliation, suffering, isolation, and powerlessness that comes with such an ignominious act. And yet, says our sacred story, **there** is where we shall find God. The message of the cross is that in that moment of tragedy and injustice and humility, we shall find the steadfastness of God.

With the cross as its high point, the gospel of Christ is ill equipped to exalt the things the world sometimes exalts. What is valuable, what is success looks much different through this lens than from the perspective of market economics. What is right looks much different through the cross than through neo-liberal or neo-conservative or radical isolationist political agendas. The message of the cross finds God in vulnerability, so it cannot possibly be an exaltation of prosperity. It finds God in suffering, so it can't just be simplistic affirmation of the power of positive thinking. The message cross finds God in trials and trauma, so it must be more than a message of privilege, greatness, and winning.

The message of the cross is more radical than that. The message of the cross is more counter-intuitive than that. The message of the cross declares that God is the one waiting for us in our tragedies. The message of the cross assures us that God is on the side of the poor, the outcast, and the despised. God is on the side of those who haven't won the social lottery. The message of the cross declares that the Source of all that is Good can be found especially among those society loathes or mistrusts or are told they are no longer welcome. It insists that in the most horrific brutality that human beings can unleash on one another, God is present, God renders a judgment on that brutality, and God ultimately reigns victorious over it.

Theologian James Cone, puts it this way:

"The cross is a paradoxical religious symbol because it *inverts* the world's value system with the news that hope comes by way of defeat, that suffering & death do not have the last word, that the last shall be first & the first last."<sup>1</sup>

The message of the cross is counter-cultural because it swims against the tide of dominant values in our world, and in fact, it indicts some worldly values systems. Paul himself puts it this way several verses after what we read today:

"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; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God." (vv. 27-29)

The foolishness of God stands in contrast to worldly values and indicts them:

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<sup>1</sup> James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 2.

- It insists that transactional savvy—the art of the deal, we might say—is not wisdom. Wisdom is relational and moral. It builds bridges; it does not burn them. It builds community; it does not divide houses.
- The foolishness of God insists that real power and strength are not to found in intimidation or will-to-power. Real power and strength come in service, in sacrifice, in sharing, in building others up, in preserving dignity and integrity.
- The message of the cross declares that blessing comes not through self-serving prosperity but through generosity. It comes not from taking care of ourselves first, but by sacrificing and serving others and the common good, as inclusively as we can define it.
- The message of the cross is that the true expression of our humanity is not competition but community. The true expression of ourselves is not being of Paul or of Cephas, not being conservative or liberal, insiders or outsiders, Republican or Democrat, black or white, Americans or foreigners. The truest expression of ourselves comes when we are united in the same purpose.
- The message of the cross redefines greatness—who is the greatest among us? He who identifies with the least among us, says the One who went to the cross. Greatness is not defined by “winning.” Greatness is defined by losing ourselves that others might gain, and God might be glorified.

On the cross’s value system, success defines itself not by pointing to itself but by gesturing to others. Success is measurable when people have hope, when they are cured of their disease and protected from their sickness, when they can see light in the darkness and kinship in one another again. God’s foolishness stands worldly values on their head, and defines success against the kingdom of God, where people will come from east and west and from north and south, and sit together with the Christ who signaled God’s love with arms wide open, on —of all things—a cross.

### III.

So what of it? What of this screwy value system that seems to take the world’s celebration of power and competition and the cult of personality and turn it on its head? What of it? Well, it’s precisely the value system Jesus calls us to adopt for our own. Then and now, Jesus calls disciples to follow him in this counter-cultural movement. To cast about not for fish but for the spirits of people. To love the values of God. To live the Way of Jesus. To carry the message of the cross as a form of social protest against forces that hate and divide.

Earlier this summer, John McCain returned to Washington from a devastating cancer diagnosis to vote on the Republican attempt to “repeal and replace” the Affordable Care

Act. In the speech he made on his return to the chamber, McCain held up a mirror to his colleagues in the Senate and named their dysfunction. “We’re getting nothing done,” he charged, and he insisted that the reason was that the Senate had retreated from its principles as “the world’s greatest deliberative body.” If McCain was right that deliberative principles are the soul of the Senate, that’s just because the Senate is supposed to represent the ideals of American democracy. Deliberation is the heart of democracy. Collective consideration of the questions and challenges before us is the responsibility of citizens and leaders alike in a fully participatory democracy. But we seem ill-equipped to deliberate constructively on the issues confronting us.

A commitment to the art of deliberation requires us to cultivate the proper virtues of participatory democracy. In other words, a healthy deliberative democracy is made up of citizens and leaders with the character to see what is attractive about respectful discourse and cooperation, and to strive for it. Deliberative democracy depends on the cultivation of civility, not to mask our differences or squelch dissent but to serve as the ethos in which we navigate the very real disagreements and differences we harbor. Democracy thrives on an abundance of humility, the recognition of the limits to our own knowledge, experiences, and perspectives, and openness to the possibility that we might learn from those with whom we disagree. Healthy democracy requires patience with the long-term, messy processes of decision-making, and it invites us in its very structures to spend much of that time listening to others who are different from us, in addition to pressing our own views. It requires a politics with integrity, which includes not only a faithful and honest representation of ourselves and our motives, but also an accurate representation of others. Most of all, a well ordered deliberative democracy absolutely demands the presumption of mutual respect, in which we honor, protect, and promote the rights of others to participate in all aspects of public life. A democracy is truly deliberative only when its citizens and leaders embrace virtues like these as the character necessary for authentic community.

As American politics has illustrated vividly, as Charlottesville laid bare, we are not a healthy deliberative democracy at this moment. We are not a democracy bound together with humility, patience, integrity, and mutual respect. We lack collective character. The values that bind us are under siege. If we are to remain hopeful in these times, we need counter-movements that push our public culture in more virtuous, respectful, and constructive directions. In particular, we need schools of character to train citizens in the art of democratic life, to cultivate the virtues of community—and practice them.

In my most recent book, *Forbearance: A Theological Ethic for a Disagreeable Church*, I explore what the virtues of disagreement might look like in Christian community, in the practice of forbearance. Forbearance is the active practice of community within church, navigating difference and disagreement as an extension of virtue and a reflection of our unity in the Christ of the cross. Humility, patient listening, faithful integrity, persistent wisdom, and respectful friendship are all attitudes that Christianity’s better angels celebrate as the sinews of true theological community. They also happen to map pretty well onto the virtues that deliberative democracy requires. In cultivating the virtues of forbearance, then, churches not only make their own bodies more faithful reflections of the

Body of Christ, they also position themselves to serve as schools of democratic character, for the good of the society beyond church.

When Christians cultivate the character of forbearance, the character of the cross, practice it within church, and then model it in public participation, we export the virtues of our faith and offer them as norms of a good society. Not only are the virtues of forbearance—the values of the cross—consistent with the ideals of democratic character, they may be our most important social witness in this moment.

#### IV.

And that is the message that confronts us today. The cross is a calling, an identity. The cross is a species of character. The cross is our public witness to a nation and world desperate for more virtuous character.

But it also is a testament of hope. “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.” As Martin Luther King preached, Jesus’ power over the cross assures us that “darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.” The foolishness of the cross assures us that the light of God shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it. Not the darkness of crucifixion, not the darkness of injustice or oppression, not the darkness of division and hatred, not the darkness of racism or sexism or classism, not the darkness of godlessness, not the darkness of tragedy or trial.

The light shines in the darkness, so even though darkness seems to be all around us, those drunk on the foolishness of God do not give up hope. We are communities of character, the character of the cross. So we will seek the light. We will work for the light. We will practice light. We will encourage the light in one another. For we are fools for God, and as such we believe that the foolishness of God’s reign shall overcome the fools we endure in this one. Amen.