

Sunday, March 4, 2018 – Third Sunday in Lent
“Leaving Foolishness Behind”

1 Corinthians 1: 18-31

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Proverbial Structure

Adapted from CSL Series “Leave It Behind”

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

In preparing for today’s sermon, I came across a Bible passage that describes me very well. At least it describes me most of the time. Psalm 14:1 says, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” Yup, that’s me. It may surprise you to hear that, this is often the point where the fire and brimstone preacher starts railing on “those people” out there who don’t get it and you get the vague comfort and satisfaction of feeling affirmed in how right you are over and against the evils in the world. Yet the first thing we ought always to examine when God’s Word has something to say is to ask what it has to say to me. Now don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I’m a thoroughgoing atheist. I know, many church people get upset by atheism and there’s been a new surge of atheism in recent years. But I have plenty of atheist-like moments when I don’t trust the power of the cross of Jesus Christ. Paul says, “The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). I’m not one of those who are perishing; thank You, Jesus. That’s why I observe Lent by hanging onto His cross for dear life. I’m just saying that there are plenty of times in my life when I forget Him whom I have believed. There are times when I forget that He is able to keep what I have entrusted to Him. There are plenty of times when I imagine that I have to do it on my own (2 Timothy 1:12). There are plenty of times when I do not do what the First Commandment not to have any other gods commands – that is, to fear, love and trust in God above all things.

Do you have times when the stresses of life, the press of work, the heart-rend of interpersonal problems, your physical or emotional suffering, things like that make you temporarily forget that the power of God is best in our weakness? When we foolishly forget, when we have atheist like moments, there’s a simple explanation and it’s deep down in your heart and mine. We’re born with sin. Sin doesn’t simply mean we’re born prone to mistakes, in the cutesy, dismissive “Well, nobody’s perfect” kinda way. Sin means we’re born as rebels against God (AC II). Baptism covers over that original sin. It’s a washing of regeneration, a new birth. That comes from the cross of Jesus. However, the sin still lurks in our hearts;

rebelliousness against God is still down in here, down in my heart and deep down in yours. Sin clings. Sin clings to us, and it wants to show power. It wants, as Paul credits to the unbelieving pagan Greek crowd in his letter to Corinth, rational proof. It also wants, as Paul credits to the “church people” of his day, those from the people of Israel, signs and wonders. There’s this terrible urge down in our hearts to live by sight and not by faith (1 Corinthians 5:7). Either way, whether appealing to our intellect or our emotion, the so-called “wisdom” of man is actually real foolishness. That’s why I sometimes act like a fool. Remember? “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” Deep, deep down, deeper in our hearts than our thoughts can take us, is my sinful will to power. Deep in my impenetrable darkness is my desire to have things explained to me so that I can sit in judgment, I who think myself so wise. This deep down rebelliousness shows; it comes up. Today God says, “No! The weakness of the cross is the right way.” It’s God’s way. So let’s leave our natural folly behind and realize again that the “foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:25). That weakness is on the cross, hanging limp to help us, dying so that we might live. Jesus is the weakness of God and the strength of God.

Let me play the devil’s advocate for a moment. You can be sure that the devil is trying to undermine what I’m saying. How do we know that the weakness of the cross is in fact the power of God? Because we’ve got the story right here in the Bible. “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction” (Romans 15:4). What former things, in which former days? Well, what’s written in today’s Old Testament lesson, for starters. We heard the Ten Commandments, the perfect Law of God that is meant to apply to people of all times and all places – have no other gods, honor God’s name, remember the Sabbath, honor parents and authorities, do not murder or hate, do not commit adultery or lust, don’t steal, don’t lie or gossip and don’t be jealous of your neighbor’s relationships or possessions. But as rigid or harsh as all those rules might sound, God leads off with something that looks to me like a weak move. A foolish move. In fact, the first thing God says, before the Ten Commandments are spelled out, before any consequences or proving yourself or punishment, God leads with this: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have

no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2-3). That is, “I brought you out. I am your Savior. I am your Redeemer.” Did you catch that? He gave out the prize first! He gave up all His leverage!

But maybe that is the whole point – pure foolishness to the wisdom of humans, but God’s ways are not the ways of our world. The ways of the Egyptians make you slaves. The ways of the world make you slaves.” Complain about the weakness of God? That’s like asking to go back to slavery in Egypt. “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

We know that the cross is the power of God because we’ve seen the story played out in our own lives. Paul reminded the Corinthians, “Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 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, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). That’s not a bad description of you, me, and our church. All the spiritual treasures that we hold in our hearts and celebrate Sunday after Sunday, they’re not our doing. They’re from God, and He pours out His goodness to us sinners from the cross of Jesus Christ, and He does it not as a consequence of how well you will and follow Him but it’s what He leads with – He gives up the prize, He gives up His very self, to be your Savior. I know it’s Lent, and there’s a tradition that we give up a joyous Hebrew word that means “Praise the Lord” during this season but you know what – that’s worth of a praise the Lord. Let’s enjoy it today as we journey toward Easter.

From the cross Thy wisdom shining breaketh forth in conqu’ring might;

From the cross forever beameth all Thy bright redeeming light.

Alleluia, alleluia! Praise to Thee who light dost send!

Alleluia, alleluia! Alleluia without end! (LSB 578, 4)

“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no god.’” Let’s leave that folly behind. Amen.