

**1 Corinthians 1: 18-25**  
**March 4, 2018**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**

In the 1960's there was a game show called "You Don't Say." Its slogan, repeated at the beginning went, "It's not what you *say*; it's what you *don't say*." If we exchange the word "say" with the word "know" we have the perfect definition of what the Bible means by the word "wisdom." It's *not* what you *know*; it's what you *don't know*."

At the heart of biblical wisdom is the humble admission that God is so great and beyond human understanding that words are dangerous—especially when applied to God. They will always, *always*, distort the truth. Biblical wisdom teaches that human beings cannot by our own logic prove the existence of God. We cannot define the qualities of God or the scope and depth of God's being. Any words we use to characterize who God is and how God acts in the world describe a "small g" god—a lower case god of our understanding.

And yet we cannot avoid using words to express what we think and feel and to express our understanding of who God is. Words are gifts from God for the purpose of meaningful communication. Words, spoken and written, join music and visual arts as the means by which we reflect on life and then seek to communicate our reflections with others. Early Christian writers say that God has *condescended* to be expressed in words of scripture. It is a sign of God's humility that he allows words to describe who he is and *how he is* in the world.

The Bible further teaches that God is known through actions. Thus the book of Genesis tells us that the creation of the universe is the result of God's *speech*. It is why the Gospel of John speaks of Jesus as "the Word"—the full expression of the reality of God in human form. Yet if we try to understand God's perfect revelation of himself in Jesus by means of *what we know*, we will fail miserably. It is impossible to know Jesus fully and personally by what we *think* we know about the world and from what we *think* we know from our experience. It is only when we come to Jesus trusting in what we *don't know* that we can receive him into our lives.

This is the thrust of what Paul is saying to the Corinthians. In Paul's absence from Corinth, the community of faith has become consumed by conflict. So-called theological experts have invaded the community and promoted their version of the gospel. Their primary strategy in promoting their version of the truth is to distort and discredit what Paul had taught. As a result the congregation has lost its unity and has become a group of factions each identified with people who espouse the "true" understanding of God revealed in Jesus.

In seeking to restore the unity of faith Paul tells them that they have lost contact with the humility that comes from the utter vastness of God and have come to trust their own understanding. They have come to trust *what they know instead of trusting that they don't know*.

To make his point Paul makes a double use of the Greek word *sophia* which we translate as "wisdom." He contrasts the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of God. The former is represented by the great debaters and orators, the "wise" ones who convince people of their truth by the art of careful and skillful arguments.

In place of the skilled use of trained persuasive speech—what the Greeks called rhetoric—Paul proclaims what he calls the “foolishness” of his proclamation. He is clearly making use of the words the experts have used against him. The Greek word translated here is the source of our word “moron.” We can sense that this is no abstract theological debate. It has become bitterly personal.

With the skill of a great debater, Paul uses the insult as the spearhead of his reply. He is unrepentant and unapologetic. Of course the gospel of Jesus Christ is foolishness! It is moronic! The proclamation offends the very foundations of human reason. How silly! A crucified messiah! What sane person could swallow such nonsense? The answer is, of course, nobody who believes that human reason and experience is the only valid means of discovering reality. For them the path to wisdom is through more information, more rational knowledge.

But, Paul proclaims, God has rigged the system. God cannot be known through human wisdom. We may learn a lot about the world through study and skill. We may get hints or clues about how the universe came into being. But knowing about the nature of things is not the same as knowing God. For that we have to accept the futility of seeking to know God through the force of our own understanding. Such trust in our own understanding leads people to believe that there is no God at all.

It is only when we renounce the idea that human reason in general and our perceptions in particular are reliable guides to ultimate reality and instead place our understanding in the presence of the presence of the God we cannot see that the blinders fall from our eyes. Far from eliminating the importance of reason and exploration, our awareness of the vastness of God breaks the shell of our carefully

constructed world views and we experience a power greater than ourselves that touches our lives at the deepest level and guides us in our living.

That is why God sent a human being, not a learned lecture. That is why God sent a “who” not a “why” or a “how.” That is why God sent someone who in his very life fully discloses the heart of God. It is why we are saved not by a series of carefully thought out ideas but by an event—a death on a cross which is for Paul the very symbol of foolishness. We who believe this foolishness find our lives expanded by wonder and joy! Amen.