

Sermon: The Message of the Cross  
Sunday, February 2, 2020 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown,  
Iowa

Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 1:18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God

Introduction-the cross at Wayne, Michigan

The church at Wayne, Michigan has a rather modern, sunlit and airy sanctuary. It has stained glass, but also open windows toward the ceiling in order to let in as much sunlight as possible. The architecture and furnishings are designed to be practical and the layout of the building is well considered. The cross in the sanctuary, however, is made of rough hewn beams from the original church building. It looks like it was made of wood taken from a railroad yard. It is rough and not pretty and stands out against the rest of the room. It is that way for good reason. The cross is one of the ugliest theological doctrines in Scripture, and the most essential, along with the Resurrection. It leaves us, the human race, with no room to bargain.

Set the stage

The Apostle Paul addresses the church in Corinth about the issue of sectarianism and essentially tells them that any attempt of "one-upmanship" is useless and morally bankrupt, and is so because of the cross. The cross (and the Resurrection), he wrote is at the heart of the Gospel and nothing must take its place. He goes on to write about how offensive the cross is, both to Jewish and Greek people of his day. He wrote that the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. As essential as the cross is to Christian theology, it is controversial to this day.

The cross is a disgraceful punishment, and it is an insult to our moral self-sufficiency

It was an absolutely barbaric method of execution, designed to cause suffering and misery for at least two or three days before the victim endured a wretched and humiliating death. The reason the Lord Jesus died in less than one day was because He was beaten within an inch of His life before they nailed Him to the cross. It was a punishment reserved only for the worst of the worst, and Jesus and the disciples may very well have walked passed people dying on crosses by the side of the road to Jerusalem. The Roman Empire used it often in Israel in those days.

The notion that the perfect, eternal Son of God would pay for the sins of the world in such a terrible manner is a slap in the face of all of humanity. It reveals a righteous anger and wrath against the sinfulness of all the children of Adam in spite

of the fact that we tend to minimize and make excuses, may not for other's sins, but for our own. It was once said that we tend to judge others by their words or actions but we judge ourselves by our intentions, this minimizing our culpability. But the sins of the world are great, and they include our sins as well. Thus, the cross is the great equalizer of people. We may not have the number, or the severity, of sins that the person next to us has, but we're all in need of grace.

Look at verse nineteen:

<sup>19</sup> For it is written: *"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent."*

It's a quote from Isaiah 29 (verse 14) in which the great prophet bemoans the moral and spiritual sense of self-sufficiency in the people of Israel. They draw near to me with their lips, but their heart is far from me, says the Lord. Jesus (in Mark 7) applied this same complaint to everybody. And wisdom that assumes that we have ourselves in order to be acceptable to a holy God without the grace of salvation is false, and not to be trusted.

Here are a few possible applications listed below

It is easy to maintain the activities of religion and have no real heart toward God. Watch your attitude toward prayer and your compassion toward the poor.

The cross proves that we cannot save ourselves and we have no reason to be proud.

We have to trust because we won't always understand, for the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.

What is great in the eyes of people and what is great in the eyes of God are not the same.

The Holy Spirit uses that which is of no consequence without Him.

Conclusion-the cross is the great equalizer

The great hymn includes the words "in the cross of Christ I glory", which would be distasteful and absurd if it wasn't for Christ and His Resurrection. But in the embrace of the cross we face several distasteful realizations. Human sin is far worse in the eyes of God, and far more destructive than we think. Human moral brilliance does not impress God. Human wisdom does not impress Him either. The cross is the last place we expect justice and mercy to meet, and that is exactly what happened.

