

A Foolish Message

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

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A barbershop is filled with customers when a young boy walks into the shop. Looking at the boy, the barber whispers to his customer, "This is the most foolish kid in the world. Watch while I prove it to you."

The barber puts a dollar bill in one hand and two quarters in the other, then calls the boy over and asks, "Which one do you want, son?"

The boy takes the two quarters and leaves.

"What did I tell you?" said the barber. "That kid never learns!" the barber said, laughing.

Later, when the customer leaves the shop, he sees the same young boy coming out of the ice cream shop.

"Hey, son! May I ask you a question? Why did you take the quarters instead of the dollar bill?" asked the man.

The boy took a lick of his ice cream cone and replied, "Because the day I take the dollar, the game is over."

Whether one is perceived as foolish or wise often is dependent on one's perspective.

In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul wastes no time before getting to one of his most famous and inspiring dichotomies: wisdom and foolishness. As with most of his letters, Paul is concerned with explaining the consequences—both theologically and communally—of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection.

Jesus has initiated a new age, where assumptions about the world are being overturned. Moreover, to be a community of this new age will require reconsidering what identities are valuable. Revaluing identities is never an easy task. To be told that one's communal identity - which has long been considered valuable - is no longer beneficial in this new age is a bitter pill to swallow. Our current period in the U.S. is a clear example of what happens when an identity is revalued. As maleness is slowly losing some of its privileges, resistance and anger have risen among those who feel the *value* of being a male person changing in our American culture. The same might be said of whiteness... resistance and anger have risen among those who feel the *value* of people who have white skin changing in our American culture.

Anticipating the objections of the Corinthian community, Paul attempts to explain the new values of God's eschatological kingdom. On this side of the resurrection, Paul explains, foolishness is more valuable than wisdom. This revaluing of wisdom would have been particularly harsh for the community to whom Paul was writing. Corinth, in a number of ways, is considered to be the chief city of Greece.¹ The Greek culture placed a high premium on wisdom. Author and statesman from Athens in 5th Century BCE, Aristides, wrote that on every street in Corinth, one met a "so-called wise man," who had his own solutions to the world's problems.²

¹ (Kenneth Barker 1995, 1734)

² (Kenneth Barker 1995, 1738)

Further, Christ crucified was a stumbling block for Jews. They expected the Messiah to come in power, perhaps military and political conquering power, to usher in the Davidic kingdom.

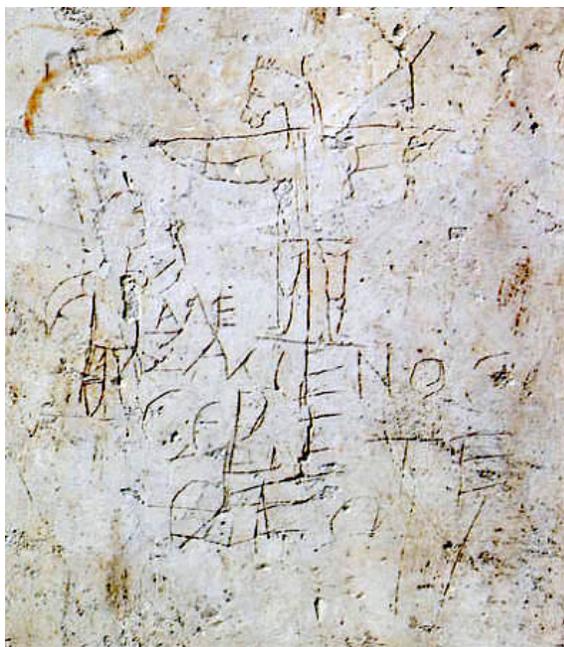
Greeks, Romans, Jews – were all sure that no reputable person would be crucified. So, it was unthinkable that a crucified criminal could be a Savior.

This is why the theological theme of reversal in Scripture, and the Gospel message as paradox, is so evident in today's pericope. Specifically, the symbol of the cross—a symbol of death and destruction, a device of torture—makes way for abundant life. Paul knows that this idea makes no earthly sense... and that is his point. The wisdom that attends to the earthly sense of things cannot fully account for the heaven now breaking into the world.

Paul is well aware how the church in Corinth will receive his words. However, he is willing to take the risk of scandalizing the community so that they might understand the new values of the Jesus-following world. Paul is calling the church in Corinth to change their perspective – to adopt a unique cultural and communal *imagination* that reconsiders the values that are too often seen as innate and immutable.

I wonder: how are we, as modern-day Jesus followers, continuing to adopt a unique cultural and communal imagination that reconsiders our own innate and immutable values? For example, how do we respond to revaluing maleness and whiteness?

From time to time throughout history, the church has actually *believed* Paul's scandalous idea. I'd like to share with you a historical artifact from Rome that shows just how shameful crucifixion was. It has to do with another story of a young boy, but this one is not in a barber shop. Instead, he is pictured in this remarkable piece of what is called "graffito."³



Though it is dated circa 200, it was discovered in 1857 during an excavation of the ruins of a boarding school for imperial page boys on the Palantine Hill, located within the emperor's palace complex in Rome's Forum. The school had been walled up some time in the third century to support construction above it. In the depiction, a Christian boy is mocked for worshipping a crucified man with a donkey's head. The boy, standing in front of the cross, raises his hand in adoration of this donkey God. Scrawled below the picture are the words: "Alexemenos worships [his] God."

I am fascinated by this, especially because I learned that it is the earliest known pictorial representation of the crucifixion of Christ and of his adoration as divine. Listen to how Richard

Viladesau describes the image in his book *The Beauty of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in Theology and the Arts—from the Catacombs to the Eve of the Renaissance*:

In a city so full of the triumphant monuments of Christianity, there is something strangely moving in finding this first visual testimony to the Christian faith amidst the

³ Graffito "Alexemenos worships his God" on display at the Palantine Museum, Rome.

fragments of daily life of pagan Rome; and even more so in finding it in this rude sketch, probably drawn by a palace page with cruel schoolboy humor to mock the faith of a fellow slave.

The graffito reminds us of how Christianity must have appeared to the sophisticated ancient pagan world: a strange minority religion from a small backwater of the civilized world: a religion that was centered on a man punished as a criminal with the most humiliating form of execution, and a faith practiced mostly by slaves and people of the lower classes. It reflects the Roman belief that the Jews worshipped a god with the head of an ass—a notion that was apparently also carried over to Christians. It also shows graphically the scandal of the cross to which St. Paul refers. For sophisticated Hellenistic society, the notion of a suffering god was ridiculous: an obviously mythological conception.⁴

This graffiti, as you might suspect, is not a compliment. In antiquity, the donkey was reviled for its stupidity and stubbornness and became the primary metaphor for describing people's foolishness. Christians in ancient Rome were slandered as donkey worshippers (why this is true remains a subject of vigorous scholarly debate). That is why the image shows a donkey Christ, upon a cross.

Yet, in an odd twist, as the Romans insulted each other and Christianity with claims of donkey worship, the Christian tradition began claiming that Joseph and Mary fled with the Christ child to Egypt riding a donkey. This image is nowhere in scripture, but the church latched onto it, and the donkey became a symbol of salvation. During the Middle Ages, the church celebrated the Feast of the Donkey and sang hymns which gave honor and praise to the donkey, which carried the holy family to safety AND carried Jesus into Jerusalem.⁵

The donkey in the hands of Christian interpreters became a symbol of a changed perspective; the world upside down. On a cross, the donkey God was designed as a deep insult, poking fun at the foolish Alexemenos, showing contempt toward the faithfulness of worshippers they thought to be ridiculous. However, there is more to the story. I love this – also discovered, in a room adjacent to the one with the graffiti, another inscription reads "Alexemenos is faithful."

Knowing about the second inscription certainly seems to imply that Alexemenos knew who he was as a follower of Jesus and was not derailed by such taunting. Perhaps to be faithful is to be foolish; but according to Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, to be foolish is wise. The world turned upside down by the resurrection provides a new perspective, which perhaps allows fools to see more clearly.

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⁴ (Viladesau 2006)

⁵ (Harris 2014)

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