“Down on the Bottom Shelf”

Let’s face it. Wisdom…intelligence…knowledge are kingpins in this world you live in. Just look at how everyone loves to add the alphabet soup unto the end of their names. Here you are introduced to CPAs, PHDs, MDs, PPA. Wisdom, intelligence, knowledge are what the Ivy-leaguerers are all about. Just listen to the wisdom and intelligence rolling out of the campuses of Brown, Harvard, Columbia and Yale. Listen to those in the know in California…Nancy Pelosi, George Clooney and George Soros…you will soon find your head spinning with more earthly wisdom than you may be able to comprehend. A short time ago I learned Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Tennessee now requires and IQ test for one of its elective surgeries. Nope…there is no doubt about it…wisdom is what you should be seeking and the world will tell you that it is on the upper shelf with upper echelon of the upper crust…people like Descartes, Freud and Bill Gates.

Now…listen to a Jewish carpenter speak about wisdom with candor. “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.” What if God does just that? What if it is simply God’s pleasure…if it just broadens the smile at the center of all things…not to hide his deepest things on the top shelf where only the smartest and brightest can find them? What if instead he places them on the bottom shelf…down real low, shoved to the back….where only the humble or a child can ever really reach them? What if it is God’s delight to whisper his best secrets into the lowly, contrite heart? What if the truth behind all that you see… and the answer to everything wrong thing here…isn’t found through a brainteaser requiring you to be smart but through a Person asking you to trust him? Here is v. 21 from 1 Corinthians chapter 1: “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.”

Then this would be the case…those who truly hold wisdom would not be an Albert Einstein or a student at Harvard or a George Clooney or a Stephen Hawkins but…well…Lydia and Asher…singing “Jesus Loves Me” in the back of the minivan as we drive along the road. Listen…Jesus has placed wisdom and salvation down on the bottom shelf.

The letter which Paul wrote almost 2,000 years ago is still timely for the church today…both to instruct and inspire. Most of the questions and problems that confronted the church at Corinth are still very much with us…problems like immaturity, instability, divisions, jealousy and envy, lawsuits, marital difficulties, sexual immorality and the misuse of spiritual gifts. Yet in spite of the concentration on the problems and their solutions, this book contains some of the most familiar and loved chapters of the entire Bible…Chapter 13 on love and Chapter 15 on the resurrection of Jesus. In the first two chapters Paul tackles the issue of wisdom. Paul addresses God’s wisdom in comparison with the wisdom of the world. Today you and I look at a small section of those first two chapters.

The Jews demanded miraculous signs or marks by which the Messiah was to be distinguished from other prophets and recognized. The Old Testament had indicated what those signs would be…and Jesus fulfilled them all. The Jews, however…with their twisted view of what the Messiah was to be…were not looking for signs of grace and mercy but for spectacular signs from heaven, which would equip their Messiah to be an earthly, political king. The Jews were familiar with miracles and signs in their history and that was what they were looking for.

The Greeks looked for wisdom. The ancient Greeks were famous for their love of wisdom. They were impressed by human philosophy and systems of thought based on logic…using sound reasoning to develop conclusions. But the wisdom they were looking for did not begin with “the fear of the Lord,” which…the Scriptures remind you…is the beginning of wisdom. The Greeks wanted a religion that challenged their intelligence…they wanted philosophy not a story about a crucified carpenter who made great claims about saving the world. In their opinion…religion should be scholarly and learned…something to be reasoned out. Both of those lines of thought ought to remind very much of what your world looks for today in religion. Today men look for Christ and religion to end wars, to eliminate poverty, to banish suffering, to assure civil rights…generally to make this world a great place to live! They forget that Jesus never made any such promises. On the contrary…he promised that such problems would plague the world until the end of time.

1 Corinthians 1:21-25 – 4th Sunday in Lent – March 10, 2013
Paul cuts to the heart of the matter: “we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.” We proclaim or announce…we don’t discuss or dispute. We are proclaiming God’s message. Since God has revealed to us the message that really works…that really saves…that really answers all those big, bad questions of life…we don’t need to spend time in futile searching. We just proclaim it so others may hear and be saved.

It is that very thing…the very message of God was a stumbling block, a trap, a snare to the Jews. From the Jewish point of view…God had cursed a crucified person forever. Even a mere reference to such a person was offensive and ridiculous to a religious Jew. So to call a crucified man the Christ or the Messiah was painful to their ears. It was the height of spiritual ineptitude. And for the Gentiles the message of the cross was stupid. To the Greeks…crucified people were a dime a dozen. To the natural way of reasoning…it was stupid to think that God would send his Son to take on human form to help you, and especially that he should die and that his death would make any difference to me and my chances for life after death. To them it was ridiculous to call a crucified criminal Lord and Savior of the world. Reminds you of those who think of Jesus and his cross as being one way to salvation…but certainly not the best. It speaks to those new Age thinkers and others who want you to look inward to find the god within. According to those types of philosophies the message of Christ crucified…especially when it is the only way to be saved from sin and death…is nothing but foolishness.

While that message may cause trouble to those stuck in their own reasoning, “but to those who God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” In those whom God has created faith through his Holy Spirit, through his Word, and through his sacrament; they love the message of Christ crucified. There is no message that is sweeter to their ears. There is no more power or wisdom of God than Christ. Through that message and faith they will be enjoyers of eternal salvation in God’s kingdom of grace and glory. That is way he came. That is why he was crucified. He saved you from your sins so that you could be at peace with God and have the sure certain hope of eternal life with the crucified Christ. Only God’s wisdom could plan this…and only God’s power could make it work.

Finally, Paul puts human beings and their philosophies and their endless spewing forth of ideas in their place. “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.” The foolish thing that God did is wiser “than men.” It is beyond anything human beings could ever conceive or dream of. You could plan and dream and devise any number of schemes by which a person could attain oneness with God…as most religions and philosophies in the world have done and will continue to do…but you would never come up with a plan like God did. Likewise, the weak thing that God did…the crucifixion of Christ look like defeat for God in the eyes of men…is stronger “than men.”

It is high time for each of you to consider what it means to follow the One whose greatest achievement in life was his death. The conclusion that many have come to is that the cross of Christ is downright foolishness.

Yet…therein lies the rub. You see…it just isn’t logical that the all-powerful God would descend from his heavenly throne of glory to take on the lowly, feeble form of a human embryo, and then be born from his mother’s body and be laid in a cattle trough. It just doesn’t add up. It doesn’t make sense that this perfect, sinless God-man would take on the burden of living the perfect life for us by his baptism in the Jordan, absorbing the poison of your sin and death into that perfect, sinless body of his. No…it just doesn’t add up. It doesn’t make sense…that the One who is Lord of all life, the One who cannot die, the immortal God should be laid low in death. It boggles the mind that the eternal Word from the Father…this cosmic king…should breathe his last and die in humiliation and shame and pain as he did. It just isn’t rational that the Father would pour out his wrath on his beloved Son. It just doesn’t add up. It makes no human sense. And…to top it off, humanly speaking…it does seem to be a pretty dumb idea that you should live by dying.

And yet that’s the way it is…isn’t it? “to you who are being saved, to you who are called” the message of the cross “is power and wisdom of God.” You don’t have to apologize for the cross. You don’t need to try and make it more acceptable to human logic. In fact…it can’t be done. It’s simply impossible to prop up the cross with enough human logic so that it makes sense. There’s really no defending the cross…it can’t be defended. It can only be proclaimed. And that’s what we do, “we preach Christ crucified.”

There is no other message to preach…you see. And, its not because you lack other topics…you simply can’t exhaust this one. For there is no other way…you heard that right, there is no other way…out from under the human predicament, no other way you or anyone else could escape the eternal hellfire you deserve
than for God to act in the dramatic and decisive way he did. Stepping into this world of yours, he took matters in to his own hands. Shouldering your burdens and carrying your sorrows, he bore your sins…taking them in his own body to the cross. Christ died your death on that cross of his. And since Jesus is God…God died. Nothing else would do. There was no other way.

Placing his best things down on the bottom shelf is exactly what God continues to do to this very day. In fact, it is what he will do right here time and time again…he once again places his greatest gifts on the bottom shelf. Garbed in the nothing but bread and wine, he will give to you what you need most…his very own body and blood. He will pull you who are humble and contrite tight to his side and whisper in your ear: “Down on the bottom shelf this forgiveness, new life and salvation is for you.”

Tragedy? No. Triumph? Check. Foolishness? No. Wisdom? Check. That’s the long and short of the cross. And there is no better way for you and me to live than to live under the cross of him who died so that we could live. His cross his anything but foolish. For you it is the very power of God for salvation. God has placed his wisdom and salvation down on the bottom shelf. Thanks be to God!