

“The Great Scandal”

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

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Rev. Amy Stickler
Corinth Reformed Church
Hickory, NC

Haven't We Already Been Here?

Normally at Corinth, we do about four sermon series per year. We pick a Gospel or theme in the Gospels at the beginning of the year, switch to a New Testament letter around Easter, pick up a book or theme from the Old Testament in the fall, and that usually carries us into Advent, which lends itself to both Old and New Testament passages. But this year has been sort of weird.

Back in January, we started a sermon series on the Apostles' Creed, talking about “God the Father Almighty.” We took a 6-week detour into some passages from Matthew. We picked up the Creed again in March, with “Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son.” We hit the brakes to have Service Sunday and our 150th anniversary, and to begin working through some parts of 1 Corinthians. We returned to the Creed again on Pentecost with “The Holy Spirit,” and we followed 1 Corinthians and the Holy Spirit all the way through last week, when we talked about “the life everlasting. Amen.” You can see some elements of the normal pattern — extra attention to Matthew in the first quarter of the year, a longer time in 1 Corinthians over the summer — but an astute observer will notice that we're back at the beginning of 1 Corinthians again today. The Creed was unusual enough; now we're repeating books? What's going on?

In lining up selections from 1 Corinthians with the last paragraph of the Creed, we realized that we had to skip over a lot of excellent passages. So, since we're not due to move on to an Old Testament book until September, we've decided to go back and pick up some parts of 1 Corinthians that we didn't want to miss. In some cases, it's because they're powerful, beloved passages. In some cases, it's because they're misunderstood or difficult to interpret passages. In both cases, they deserve our time and attention. So this is how we've come to be at this very familiar place — the first chapter of 1 Corinthians for the second time in the past two months!

Let's Start at the End

Since our sermon series is a little unusual, I figure it's okay if this sermon is a little unusual too. I can't remember a time when I've ever done this in preaching before, but I'm going to tell you the end of my message first. If you're taking notes or waiting for the one-line summary, here it is: “if it's not about the cross, it's about the wrong thing.” What's the “it” in that phrase? It's a couple things: your identity, your focus, your faith, and your goals. Just because you know the end of the message and it's an end seems simple, you don't have permission to mentally “check out.” There's still a lot to uncover

in this passage as we remain fixed on that one basic point — if it's not the cross, it's the wrong thing.

Today's passage picks up with the word "for," which is a clear indicator that what follows is closely connected with what comes before. Paul has covered a lot of ground in the first 17 verses of his first letter to the church at Corinth. In verses 1-9, he identifies them as the community Christ has called (for more on this, see Pastor Bob and/or Pastor Paul's sermon "[Who We Are](#)", 5-12-19). In verses 10-17, he jumps into the first problem about the Corinthians that has been reported to him. There are divisions within the church, and the believers are claiming to belong to or follow different leaders. To put it in terms of our Corinth, it would be like some of you saying, "I follow Pastor Paul" or "I belong to Pastor Bob" or "I am with Pastor Lori." The Apostle Paul's response to those kinds of comments is "thank God I didn't baptize any of you, so you can't say that you follow *me*!" (14-15) Because the people are quarrelling and seem to be forgetting that they all belong to Christ, Paul takes them back to the basics. He is about to tell them that if their identity is not based on the cross, it's based on the wrong thing.

In the ancient world, there was a lot of social status to be gained by being a skilled orator. Paul is living 1400 years before the invention of the printing press, so the most common and effective form of communication was speaking. The ability to speak eloquently and persuasively was highly valued. Numerous times throughout his letters, Paul warns his churches to not be swayed by these smooth talkers with their skillful words, if those words aren't in line with the message of the gospel he has preached to them. Over against the skilled orators, Paul says that the message of the cross isn't dependent on human skill. Today, for people like me and Pastor Paul, that's good news! It means that the power of the cross doesn't depend on how well we preach.

Signs and Wisdom

In this passage, Paul identifies two groups of people in Corinth who struggled to accept the message of the cross. The first group was the Jews. Paul says that they "demand signs" (22). If you look back through Jewish history, it makes some sense why the Jews would look for signs and miracles. At many significant times in Jewish history, God acted with incredible signs. He gave Moses the burning bush (Exodus 3), sent the plagues on Egypt (Exodus 7-12), led the people through the wilderness with a pillar of smoke and fire (Exodus 13), parted the Red Sea so they could walk on dry ground (Exodus 14), provided supernatural manna (Exodus 16), made a donkey talk (Numbers 22), split the Jordan River (Joshua 3), toppled the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6), made the sun and moon stand still (Joshua 10), sent rain at a prophet's request (1 Kings 18), raised people from the dead (1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 4), delivered three men unscathed from a furnace (Daniel 3), kept a man safe in a den of lions (Daniel 6), and preserved a rebellious prophet who should have been fish-food (Jonah 2). And those are just the most familiar highlights! It makes sense to me that Jews would be looking for signs. For most of their experience with God, that's exactly what he had done.

The other group is the Greeks, which Paul uses interchangeably in this passage with the word Gentiles. Whichever word he's using in this passage, he's referring to non-Jews who are not followers of Christ. Paul says that they "look for wisdom" (22). The Greeks represent the wise and educated people of the ancient world. They prized

rhetorical skill and persuasive oration, and enjoyed philosophical debates. The Greeks were also steeped in what we call an honor-shame culture. In the honor-shame culture, everybody is playing a zero-sum game. In order for me to have more honor, I need to take some of yours away. The experienced philosophers and debaters knew that in every discourse, their goal was to score “points” against their opponent, raising their overall honor, and lessening their opponent’s. This method of interacting with others works reliably throughout the Greco-Roman world. Wherever they go, the rules and the ultimate goal are the same. Just like the Jews looking for signs, the Greeks looking for wisdom makes perfect sense. The world they’re living in practically demands that they seek wisdom and clever speech.

But the cross defies expectations and turns the “normal” world upside down. The cross (keep in mind, I did not say “resurrection,” I said “cross”), isn’t a miraculous sign. It looks like defeat. And proclaiming that apparent defeat to be the center of our lives doesn’t sound very wise. To the Jews, Paul will say that if what you’re looking for isn’t the cross, you’re looking for the wrong thing. And to the Greeks, he will say that if what you’re listening for isn’t the message of the cross, you’re listening for the wrong thing.

A Scandalous Stumbling Block

In contrast to the signs that the Jews look for or the wisdom that Greeks admire, Paul says that he preaches “Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (23). I don’t often like to do Greek grammar lessons in sermons. But in this particular verse, there’s something fascinating that you’ll miss if you don’t dig a little deeper than most English translations. The message of Christ crucified is a “stumbling block” — in Greek, the word translated “stumbling block” is “skandalon.” You’ll recognize in it the same root as our English word “scandal.” Another translation for verse 23 could easily be, “but we preach Christ crucified: a scandal to Jews and foolishness to the Greeks.” What makes this message so scandalous?

First, we need to set aside some of the modern connotations of “scandal.” In its classic sense, a scandal is something that is perceived to be morally wrong and causes public outrage. It’s not a scandal if it’s not considered wrong and it’s not a scandal if there’s no controversy around it. Here in the Me Too era, the word scandal is often and easily associated with sexual harassment and abuse. Let me be clear. The word scandal should be connected with that problem. Harassment or abuse of any kind — perhaps especially sexual — is morally wrong and something we should be outraged about. I fully support bringing those issues to light and dealing with them. But that’s not what Paul is talking about. We need to think about the word scandal without sexual overtones for this passage to make sense.

The cross of Jesus is a scandal because crucifixion was the lowest, most humiliating way to be executed in the ancient world. The Romans weren’t ignorant; they knew there were other ways to kill people. They had killed plenty of people in plenty of other ways. But when the intended effect was humiliation, suffering, and shame, they chose the cross. It was public, it was gruesome, and it was torturous. That a person should be crucified is not in and of itself a scandal. But Paul’s claim — that this crucified one was the Messiah, sent by God to deliver his people — *that’s* a scandal. It’s morally outrageous to Jews that such humiliation and lowliness should be heaped upon God’s

chosen one. It's legally incongruous to them as well. Their scriptures clearly said that anyone hung on a tree was cursed by God (Deuteronomy 21:23). And yet, this is what God has done. It's nothing like the signs they had seen God perform before. This is wrong. This is offensive. This is outrageous. This is a scandal.

Then, as now, there are a lot of things that are easier to look at rather than the cross. The teachings of Jesus tend to be positive, the healings and miracles of Jesus are encouraging, the resurrection of Jesus is triumphant, the hope of eternal life with Jesus is reassuring. But none of those are the things that Paul says is the most important. Lest we camp out in the earthly life of Jesus and forget what follows, or dwell in the resurrection of Jesus and forget what precedes it, Paul points us squarely at the most gruesome, most shameful part of Jesus' story. He forces us to live lives that are grounded in that uncomfortable place where weakness and foolishness and shame appear at their most vivid. Paul says if our faith is not grounded in the cross, it's grounded in the wrong thing.

Losing the Cross

Our discomfort and dis-ease with the cross happens to be a pet peeve of mine. By virtue of being a pastor, I get to talk to a lot of people about their beliefs. Sometimes, I hear amazing stories and beautiful testimonies of God's goodness and mercy and grace and provision. Other times, I hear some really unsettling things. One of the trends I've noticed is that we as the modern church are losing the ability to talk about the cross. I'm not talking about people outside the church; I'm talking about people who would classify themselves as believing Christians.

Our inability to talk about the cross is tied up in our inability to talk in a reasonable way about sin. What I have observed most frequently is people making one of two really unfortunate mistakes. On the one side, we have some people who love to talk about sin. These folks tend to think they know all about sin. They're the sort of people who will gladly (and sometimes loudly and publicly) let you know what your sins are. And as often as not, they're pretty happy to tell you that you're going to burn for those sins. Those declarations tend to be wrapped in a good deal of judgement and condemnation. At the other end of the spectrum, we have the larger group. These are the people who are terrified to be mistaken for the first group. As an overreaction to that first group, these people tend to avoid the idea of sin altogether. They are so afraid of sounding judgmental or critical, that they're more likely to focus on how we're all good just the way we are. This group's mantra is something like, "you're perfect just the way God made you. Keep on being you."

Both groups are in the church today, and both of these groups are in danger of losing the cross. If you're in the first group and are screaming at other people about their sin, you end up standing firmly between others and the cross. That sort of behavior turns you into the self-appointed gatekeeper to the cross. But instead of drawing people toward the cross, yelling and shaming and condemning ends up driving people away from the cross they so badly need. If you're silent about sin and offering a feel-good, you-are-so-perfect message, you end up standing opposite the cross. Your message whispers to people that they don't need anything from anybody, and so you end up drawing them toward your sweet words instead of toward the cross they so badly need.

In this way, the cross is still a scandal today. It's not popular to say to anyone "you're not perfect, and you can't by your own efforts or power make yourself perfect." This is a profoundly countercultural message. It's unpopular in the world, and it's unpopular in the church. And yet, that's the message of the cross. I have said many times in many different situations that my job is just to point people toward Jesus and remind them of their need for him. Will I tell you you're a sinner? In a heartbeat. Will I lecture you on your top 5 sins? Probably not. It's the Holy Spirit's job to reveal your sin to you (John 16:8), and I'm quite sure he doesn't need my help. Plus, the Holy Spirit is much more intimately acquainted with your heart, your struggles, and your issues. I don't know all that, and frankly, I don't really want to. My job is to point you to the cross of Jesus, remind you of your need for him, then step out of the way and let God work.

That approach to talking about sin and the cross takes some humility. It means that I have to acknowledge that I'm not the judge and jury. It means I'm not the police or prosecutor of sin. It means that if you repent of your sins, I can't claim any responsibility or glory. It means people on both ends of the spectrum will probably be ticked off with me, and I'll probably end up pretty unpopular. But there's another way to look at it. If I'm doing what I've just suggested to you, I'm neither standing in front of the cross driving you away, or standing opposite the cross pulling you away. Instead, I'm standing beside you pointing you toward the cross. And if we're pointing people to anything other than the cross, we're pointing them toward the wrong thing.

Foolish, Weak, and Lowly

That model is my ideal. It's what I believe when I have the luxury of spending a week reading and studying and thinking about what's important to me and what sort of person I want to be. I don't mean to suggest to you that I do it well all the time. I don't. Sometimes I'm a judgemental jerk. Sometimes I offer worthless platitudes when they're easier than the truth. I am, to my core, a tragically flawed person. Called and chosen and redeemed, yes. But still a holy mess. Some of you know that this fall, I am beginning a Doctor of Ministry program at Duke. My first semester is focused on Leadership in the Old Testament, and the metanarrative of violence in the Old Testament. As I've been looking back through the Old Testament in preparation for those courses, I have enjoyed discovering again one of the great themes of the Bible: "God uses unlikely means." Thank God he does, because that's the only reason I'm here.

Paul rehearses this familiar theme with the believers at Corinth. There were probably a few exceptions, but Paul reminds them that most of them weren't particularly wise or influential or powerful when God called them. There were probably some educated, wealthy, noble people in the church at Corinth, but they were the exception, not the rule. Paul is pointing out that, in choosing the Corinthians, God is acting in continuity with how he's been acting since the beginning of human history. God chooses the foolish, the weak, and the lowly. Why? So there can be no denying that it's God's wisdom, God's power, and God's status that makes the difference.

Consider how God consistently chooses to favor or bless the younger sibling in societies where the first-born had many unique privileges. Abel's offering surpasses Cain's (Genesis 4); Isaac is given a greater inheritance than Ishmael (Genesis 17);

Jacob became greater than Esau (Genesis 25); Joseph was elevated above his brothers (Genesis 37); and David was made king although he was the youngest of eight brothers (1 Samuel 16)! Not to mention that God consistently sends his people to wage war against bigger, stronger opponents. He chooses leaders like Moses, who is a terrible speaker and a murderer (Exodus 2-3) and David, who is an adulterer and also a murderer (2 Samuel 11). He uses prostitutes (Joshua 2) and thieves (Genesis 31) to further his mission. He gives elderly and barren women the gift of pregnancy (Genesis 17, 1 Samuel 1). And most unlikely of all, he chooses a young virgin to be the mother of Jesus (Luke 1).

Over and over and over again, God chooses things that seem foolish and weak and lowly by human standards to accomplish his purposes. And through each of these things, he's showing that he is undeniably in control and at work in the world.

Who is Your God?

This brings us to what I consider the hardest truth of today's passage. When Paul writes to the 1st century church at Corinth, he reminds them that relatively few of them were educated, had money or power, or had the ability to influence their society. When I look at 21st century Corinth Church in Hickory, I see something different. We have some diversity in this church, but for the most part, most of you are well-educated, most of you do have money or power, and many of you have wide spheres of influence. I include myself in that category. I certainly could have more education or money or power or influence, but I'd be lying if I told you I lacked those things entirely. So what's Paul's message for those of us who don't tend to fall into the category of "foolish, weak, or lowly"? I think at its simplest, it's this — if God has called you, it's in spite of whatever wisdom or resources or power or influence you have, not because of it. God is in no way impressed by our merits, and having these things doesn't mean we're his favorite.

When I read passages like this, I am compelled to look critically at what I believe about God. And I invite you to do the same thing today. If in your understanding, God always looks like you, always thinks like you, always acts like you and is always affirming everything you believe or do, I'm not so sure that's God. In fact, it may be helpful for us to remember that, more often than not, God tends to be on the side of the people who don't look like most of us. God tends to stand with the weak, the foolish, the lowly, the powerless, the oppressed. And if that makes you uncomfortable and a little annoyed with me, I'm okay with that.

I'm so okay with it, that I'm going to let you continue to feel comfortable and annoyed. I will not be resolving today's message into a feel-good takeaway. I'm not going to tell you exactly what God wants from you. I'm not going to tell you that you're perfect the way you are. I'll tell you the same thing I hope you'd say to me — You're a sinner. You need Jesus. You need the cross. It is at the foot of the cross where we lay down our wisdom, our power, and our status. It's on that level playing field, stripped of our perceived merits, in the uncomfortable shadow of the scandalous, shameful death of Jesus where we find our identity, where we turn our focus, where we ground our faith, and where we find all we've been seeking. It's not easy, it's not popular, and it's not glamorous. But it is worth it. I can't do it for you, but I'll be right there with you. After all, if I point you to anything except the cross, I'm pointing you to the wrong thing. Amen.