

*The Foolishness of the Cross – 1 Corinthians 1:18-25*

**Rev. Matt Nieman**

**January 29, 2023**

“Really? You’ve got to be kidding me.” Where have you heard that remark before?

It often follows a reflection, an observation, a declaration, or an outrageous statement that somebody can’t imagine is for real.

Take our last two American presidents, for example. The sitting president, Joe Biden, and his predecessor, Donald Trump. Both have left us saying, “Come on. You can’t be serious.”

First, consider some of President Biden’s famous lines:

In June of 2020, he said, “Now we have over 120 million dead from Covid.” 120 million.

To a young female voter prior to his election, he asked, “Have you ever been to a caucus? No, you haven’t. You’re a lying, dog-faced pony soldier.”

And in an attempt to quote the Declaration of Independence, Biden once said, “We hold these truths to be self-evident: all men and women are created, by the, you know the, you know the thing.”

President Trump had his moments as well, of course.

Once when talking to South Dakota governor Kristi Noem, President Trump said, “Do you know it’s my dream to have my face on Mount Rushmore?”

One time, he opined: “Sorry losers and haters, but my IQ is one of the highest – and you all know it! Please don’t feel so stupid or insecure; it’s not your fault.”

And in an attempt to tell the world he had tested negative for Covid-19, President Trump said: “I tested positively toward negative, right? So no. I tested perfectly this morning, meaning I tested negative. But that’s a way of saying it. Positively toward the negative.”

Statements like these are awkward at best and false at worst (whiskey talk, as my grandmother used to call them). Foolishness, we might say.

When it comes to the cross, critics have always voiced their skepticism. “Really? You can’t be serious. God chose to die? And God did this in such a way as to suffer? God? Really?”

To an extent, even the strongest of believers can’t help but consider the story of the cross as foolishness. Because it really makes no sense.

God who is the creator—sovereign, omnipotent, omniscient—bleeding and suffocating to death as a human on a wooden cross? You can’t be serious!

For as long as the Christian story has been around, it has been a foolish one. It is foolish to our human minds. That the creator God, who has existed since the beginning, would choose to become vulnerable in such a way that the seminal event in God’s story would take place at a cross (and then at an empty tomb) is a story that many intellectuals have used to label it as rubbish or foolishness.

The apostle Paul recognizes this in his letter to the Corinthians. Yet, he doesn’t divert from his belief in the power of the cross.

“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

The power of God. Indeed, the power of God, not the weakness of God, is found in the cross. It is the power of God to humble himself in the form of a servant, to subject himself to human weakness and pain, to feel the depth of emotions that all of us feel.

The foolishness of it all!

What a fool the religious authorities thought Jesus was when he emerged onto the scene early in his ministry. What fools the masses were to gather around him and listen to what he was saying. And what foolish things he was saying to them.

In his sermon on the mount, he said things that went against the conventional norms of society, things that are today still so unconventional.

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope,” he said. Wait a minute, those who had it all together were supposed to be the blessed ones.

“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you,” he said. Wait, the blessed were supposed to be the ones who had everything.

“You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less.” Wait, the blessed were supposed to be the ones who aspired to have more and more.

Jesus said some other foolish things, too. He said, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”

Wait a minute, the world is about getting even and settling scores. What’s all this about doing to others as you would have them do unto you?

This is the inverted way God works. It runs counter to what the world values in all its selfish, humanistic ambitions. As author Eugene Peterson points out, “We follow a very different leader, one who in virtually every detail guides us in a way of living that is counter to that of the world.”

How foolish it all is!

And yet, how powerful the story of the cross is. How powerful it is to the one who is poor, hungry, and thirsty. How powerful it is to one who is persecuted or who strives to be a peacemaker. How powerful it is to someone in mourning or who is in the midst of deep pain.

In his book, *Stories from the Edge – A Theology of Grief*, Greg Garrett tells of his time as a hospital chaplain and a conversation he had late one night with a woman named Pamela.

*Pamela was 37 years old and suffering from terminal brain cancer, and although her nurses and doctors were of course sympathetic to her situation, she was also driving them crazy. Her night nurse called me at four o’clock one morning and urged me to come and talk to her, saying, “She needs something.”*

Clearly what she meant was, “She needs something more than I can give her.” As I rolled out of bed yawning and tired, the nurse told me that Pamela hadn’t slept for days, that she was asking the nurses for ever bigger doses of sleep meds and for pain pills several times an hour, and biggest problem of all, she was resisting the clear suggestion of her medical staff that there was nothing more they could do for her in the hospital.

I arrived outside Pamela’s room about 4:30 a.m. and found her nurse, who looked as exhausted as I felt. She told me that Pamela’s cancer was untreatable, and that she was much more likely to get sick there on the ward from staph or some other opportunistic infection than to get better from any medical intervention they could perform for her at this point.

“So I hope you can talk her into going home,” she said, and then she pushed me into the room with obvious relief.

Pamela and I had a long visit, and there were a lot of issues haunting her, both physical and spiritual. She was filled with grief at the thought of leaving her teenaged son behind. She was worried about how her husband, who was “a baby in the faith,” would deal with her death. She was scared about that death, and because she was a devout Christian, she was trying to make sense of God’s purpose at the same time as she was asking me to pray hard for divine intervention. She talked for over an hour, and as I got up to go, I promised to come back again.

On our second visit, after she had brought me up to date on her last visit with the doctors, who still wanted to discharge her, I asked Pamela a question: “Do you think God understands your pain?”

A sad smile spread across her face. “I know he does. Jesus died on the cross for the worst of sinners. He experienced pain and death. God knows pain, and he knows my pain. He sees everything.”

“Do you believe God is walking beside you in your pain?”

She considered for a moment, took a deep breath. “I believe it. But sometimes I forget. I get scared. Right now, it’s here with me—I can feel him. But when it’s late, or when I’m scared and hurting, I can’t always keep that feeling.”

The foolishness of the cross is also the power of God to Pamela, to every person who hurts, and to every believer who puts him or

herself on the hook for their faith. There are moments when we get scared, moments when we doubt, but we still come back to this belief that when we hurt, because of the cross, God understands.

It's countercultural, the cross. Everything about it goes against what society says we should want in a God. And because it is countercultural, so are we, the church.

More and more, we are a unique bunch. While we don't and shouldn't withdraw ourselves from the culture in which we live, we do and should stand out as being different.

We are a counterculture for the common good—eager to share how God's strengthening presence is near to all who would recognize it. And it's because of the cross—not foolishness, but the power of God.