



Christ Lutheran Church

605 South Fifth Street • Norfolk, NE 68701

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Pastor Chip Winter, Director of Ministries

"A Word to Make Wise." – 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

3rd Sunday in Lent – March 4, 2017

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Grace to you and Peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. The text for our sermon is the Epistle appointed for the day and already read for us from 1 Corinthians.

My dear family in Christ, there are certain problems, constant through time. Nature can throw us some tremendous curves – like the blizzard here weeks ago or the flooding in Ohio over this past week. But what often causes us consternation, what can truly get under our skin, comes from our neighbors. Jean Paul Sartre observed this when he wrote, **"Hell is other people."** And to show that this has been a problem for quite some time, let me read this quote for you. **"Children today are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers."** Such is attributed to Socrates in the early 400s BC.

In our text today St. Paul addresses two types of people with two types of problems. There are (1) those whose demands must be satisfied and there are (2) those who reserve the right to figure things out all by themselves. Now in some respects these two qualities seem natural to Americans: we pride ourselves in requiring things to be done to certain standards and if you want the job done right, you'll probably have to...(do it yourself).

By and large we admire someone who strives for excellence and seeks to encourage others to do the same. We witnessed some phenomenal performances at the recently completed Winter Olympics. But this sort of mindset is problematic when it is applied to one's spiritual journey or well-being. St. Paul rightly identifies these attitudes as problems when they are exercised within one's relationship to God.

The Jews of Christ's time and Paul's day demanded a definitive sign from God before they would believe that Jesus was the long-awaited blessing for the world. It's tough to blame them – you'd want some proof before you put all of your precious eggs into His basket. But sign given after sign was ignored or explained away. ²⁸ **Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”** ²⁹ **The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.”** ³⁰ **Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine.** (John 12:28-30) What more could you want? How much more explicit can it get? They'd seen miracles and feeding, healings and raisings. ¹⁸ **So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?”** ¹⁹ **Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” (John 2:18-20)**

The requisite sign would be fulfilled when the Temple of our Lord's body would be riven by nail and thorn and spear and the same glorious abode of God with Man would be raised again to life on the third day – all for our redemption! But still for some this was too humble and inglorious. That ghastly cross was not worthy of God.

The Greeks weren't any better. Instead of the right sign from God they insisted on finding the truth on their own. They would look for the wisdom of the world, the key to the universe

themselves. They didn't know what it would be but they'd recognize it when they found it. Their own wisdom would lead them to the ultimate wisdom.

Yet again, Jesus Christ is the solution to their quest. He is the Word of God Incarnate. In Him is found the wisdom and the power of all time. He is the fulfillment of God's eternal promise, but He is again too simple to take seriously. If Jesus is not good enough for the Jews, he's certainly not good enough for the Greeks.

And just as Socrates' earlier quote sounded contemporaneous, St. Paul's laments can be voiced with equal conviction, today. For so many, today, the cross is a stumbling block. It's foolish. It's a folly.

When we traveled to England last year we visited High Claire Castle, the site of the television series "Downton Abbey." As we looked out one of the windows I noticed an arched edifice halfway up a far hill. It looked like a ruin in that it was unfinished, but it looked in good shape. When I asked, I was told that it was "Heaven's Gate" and that it was a "folly." Many English estates have these "follies." They are structures or partial structures just meant to catch the eye – they signify nothing. They're just there for decoration and have no meaning. This is how many would view the cross of Christ Jesus.

Many years ago, at a World Council of Churches conference for women called a "reimagining" conference a speaker took the stage. She said "**We don't need folks hanging from crosses and dripping blood and weird stuff.**" For this she was roundly applauded, while another minister said he came away from the conference "**refreshed and challenged.**"

The sign that God has given His eternal love for all people and the means whereby He has forgiven them is the Son, hanging on a cross, dripping blood, offering His life. It remains a stumbling block, weird stuff, foolishness to the worldly, a folly signifying nothing.

William Murchison, a writer for the Dallas Morning News years ago, commented that unlike previous forms of paganism, requiring bejeweled idols and costly perfumes, all our paganism requires is a mirror. An insightful comment about those of us who will not allow the God revealed in His own word to be the God of all creation. They know better. They'll find god themselves – and often in themselves.

These two problems, in St. Paul's day and now, are centered in the self. You determine when God has fulfilled your demands for proof; you will find your own key and meaning for life. It is all proud selfishness.

And just where has this gotten our wonderful selves? During my lifetime, out-of-wedlock births have gone from 5% to nearly 41% of births. Violence as a possible, pseudo-acceptable means of expressing outrage or excitement has led to (1) bonfires, cars tipped over and looting in the cities of both the losing and the winning teams in championship contests, as well as (2) skyrocketed killing rates in both gun free zones and your run of the mill work place: since 2012 11% of all workplace deaths are a result of homicide – averaging 9 per week across our country!

God has been most clear in His revelation about what he would have us do – and these ten commandments, read in today's lesson, have been broken by each of us, in spirit and letter, times over. That's the problem with people.

But God has taken that problem with people – our infidelity, our fickleness, our greed and our pride – and He has made that problem His own. Christ Jesus became the problem child of the Father. AS the paradigm of unruliness and ingratitude, Jesus was sent out of the Father's sight. The punishment for the enormity of the sins of humankind was visited upon Him in His hours on the cross. Our problems cost Him His life on the hill of execution.

But that is not the mistake of God. That is not the folly of God. That crucifixion, coupled with the subsequent resurrection, is the power of God and the wisdom of God, as St. Paul puts it. Its message of God's love and forgiveness for us is all we truly need for our strength in this world. We would love to know more about the purposes and plans of the Father, but this we have been given to know and it truly is all we need to know for this life.

Our stubbornness and our selfishness are witnessed just as often today as when St. Paul did his work. But in God's eyes we are not a problem. His wise and powerful eyes see us as a challenge, perhaps, but not as a problem. We are His children.

We were made that way in one or two shining moments. Our problems were resolved by God's wise power in Jesus' last breath on Good Friday and in Jesus' first breath on the first day of the week. If we demand irrefutable proof of God's intent for us, if we demand to know how our relationship with the Almighty is to run, we have no further to look than the Holy Scriptures. There we will encounter His power and His wisdom and we will find forgiveness for our selfish demands and the power to re-enter our lives in humility and thankfulness. Amen.