

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:22-25).

Throughout this Epiphany season, Jesus is revealing His glory. Through inspiration, Peter said of Jesus, ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”*** And Jesus turned a persecutor of the faith into the greatest defender of the faith. And Christ’s ultimate glory is Him crucified onto a cross as He died for our sins. This is what Lutheran pastors preach. We preach the Word of the Cross: Christ crucified for sinners. It is by this Word of the Cross is how God saves.

Now, back in October, Kurt, Willie and I were working on how to get a portion of our church parking lot lit. As you know, it tends to get dark at night, and when it is October, it gets darker earlier each night until the winter solstice each December 21st.

So, here we are, trying to figure out how to make the parking lot brighter until we noticed something off the end of the church’s canopy. It was a light! But the light didn’t work and hasn’t worked for years. So, we all tried to learn more about this light. Then Willie climbed the ladder and found out that the power to that dead light was still live. The next question was how to replace that light with a new light and not shock Willie in the process. So, Kurt and myself made our way to the circuit breaker boxes and began flipping switches: Canopy – nope; Emergency Lights – nope; Entry/office – nope; Narthex – nope; Barn – nope. We were at whit’s end. We were puzzled.

We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. You know that phrase “Christ crucified,” that phrase too, sounds like utter nonsense. How is that a good thing? That sounds more like defeat than a victory!

“Christ crucified” is a paradox. That seems so contrary to anything good! That word “Christ” also means “Messiah” and a messiah is someone who is of royal dignity. And the word “crucified” tells of an executed criminal, who has lost any and all claims to human dignity or any positive status *at all!*

But “Christ crucified” is what we preach. “Christ crucified” is certainly a stumbling block.

To Jews, a crucified Messiah was certainly an obstacle in coming to faith in Jesus. In fact, as Deuteronomy 21 tells us, anyone who has been crucified was seen as repugnant, unacceptable, and cursed by God. So, for Jews, crucifixion on a cross was the most shameful death imaginable.

To Greeks, who are entangled in a culture enamored by power and success, “Christ crucified” also made no sense. How could a crucified criminal ever be considered as the Savior of the world? Now, Greeks were known for their worldly wisdom, but they were not alone. Romans, too, also thought any worship of a crucified Messiah as ridiculous. In fact, Romans spoke of Christians as “worshipping a dead man” – which was utterly absurd!

For all nonbelievers, mankind is the measure of all things. For nonbelievers, they demand evidence that falls within the parameters of their own lived experience.

Even with the differences between Jews and Greeks of yesteryear, St. Paul says that they are very much alike. He says that both Jews and Greeks have much in common. For they both have a common quest for impressive signs of outward success, whether that be a display of power, such as the plagues of Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, or ejecting the Romans from Palestine, to today’s modern demands for health and wealth.

The Jews demanded signs. They demanded Jesus give them a powerful sign to prove His Messianic claims. And Jesus gave them many signs. He healed the sick; He opened the eyes of the blind; He raised the dead; He preached good news to the poor in spirit. But they wanted different signs.

These Jews of Jesus’ earthly ministry demanded Jesus to do signs according to their own demands. You see, they wanted to be in control. They wanted Jesus to do their bidding. They wanted a Disney Genie-kind of Jesus who just grants their wishes.

So, in response to their demands, Jesus said: ***“An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”*** (Matthew 12:39-40).

In other words, if you really want a sign, look to what will soon happen. He says, ***“Look to My death and resurrection!”*** Look to the word of the cross!

For the Greeks, they have demands too. Now, not signs, but they demand wisdom. They wish to hear from a great teacher. They wish to learn pithy sayings. But, what wisdom is there from a dead Messiah? Again, “Christ crucified” is just foolishness. “Christ crucified” is just silly. “Christ crucified” is just a waste of time.

On top of this, the Greeks weren’t that interested in learning from a dead man about the problems of sin and guilt. You see, the Greeks and Romans believed they had sin and guilt all figured out. They believed they had all the answers.

The Word of the Cross is certainly foolishness to the worldly wise who are perishing, but to us, who are being saved, it is the power of God.

For the Jews and Greeks of yesteryear, they were seeking what is known today as the Theology of Glory. This Theology of Glory emphasizes human achievement and worldly success as paths to God’s favor and His glory. It’s all about personal glory, easy answers, self-improvement, wealth and comfort. It downplays sin and suffering. In John 14, Philip spoke to Jesus with this Theology of Glory saying: ***“Show us the Father”*** (John 14:8). Jesus then set Philip aside and said, ***“How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me?”*** (John 14:9b-10). Philip was looking for signs and wisdom, but Jesus said to just look to Him saying, ***“No one comes to the Father except through Me”*** (John 14:6). What Jesus is saying to Philip and us is that God can only be found through suffering and the cross.

We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. We preach the Theology of the Cross. True signs and true wisdom is only found in Christ the crucified.

For sure, the power of God through the Theology of Glory is certainly visible in creation, but the Theology of the Cross, which is the grace of God is only found through His cross and His Means of Grace: His Word and Sacraments. For, the grace of God certainly appears weak and foolish to unbelievers. But for us, it is the true power of God.

Jesus preached the Theology of the Cross. He preached that suffering is central to understanding God and the human condition. He preached that He must die to atone for the sins of the world – yours and my sins of all of human history. Jesus preached that through His atoning death that He would put an end to eternal death. He preached that through His death and bodily resurrection He would give us forgiveness, life, and salvation. So, it is only through the Word of the Cross that we receive the forgiveness of yours and my sins.

By the Word of the Cross, God outsmarted and overpowered all human wisdom and all human power. And it was from those Jews and Greeks of yesteryear that God would grow His Church as a new race, a royal priesthood. He made us all one in Christ Jesus!

So, if you are looking for signs and wonders as a display of God’s power, you will find that power displayed in Christ the crucified. And if you are on a quest for wisdom, you will find God’s wisdom perfectly revealed in the Word of the Cross.

For as God’s Word proclaims in Isaiah 55: ***“My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts”*** (Isaiah 55:8-9).

So, did we ever figure out which circuit breaker switch was connected to that canopy light? Well, after flipping the breakers for the canopy, the emergency lights, the narthex, the barn, we came to another switch, a switch that just seemed that it couldn’t possibly work, it said “Cross.” So, we flipped it. It was the one. Always look to the cross. It seemed like folly, but it was the wisdom of God. We have light and salvation through the Word of the Cross! We preach Christ crucified and risen for sinners, because for us who are being saved, it is the power of God! Amen.

*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +