

Church Workers' Conference
 October 8, 2017
 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

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 LCMS Kansas District
 Capitol Plaza Hotel – Topeka, Kansas

Dear pastors, educators, district staff, and guests—fellow laborers in Christ's Kingdom and heirs of the Reformation—each of us Living in Our Vocation: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

The power and wisdom of God for our consideration this evening, is that reading we heard from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter one—the theme scripture passage for this conference. To bring it to mind again, hear once more these two key verses:

“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” And verse 21: *“For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.”*

I'd like to talk with you this evening about the folly of what we preach and teach and the message we've been given to proclaim.

I remember a large, family gathering early in my college years where there were lots of aunts, uncles, and cousins among whom was my nice, but boldly atheistic uncle. For years I'd heard him joke about Christianity, especially at milestone events like confirmations, and the like. A group of us were sitting outside, visiting, when the conversation turned to what several of us young adults were going to do with our lives. When I announced my intent to finish the pre-seminary program at Concordia—River Forest, then study to be a pastor, that uncle (with feigned regret) said, “What a waste!”

“The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing.”

But I'll bet many if not most of you have experienced a similar sort of derision—either of your vocation as pastors and educators in the Church, or simply a derision of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that you believe in your heart and confess with your lips. Maybe it was at a wedding ceremony, where there was a high percentage of attendees who likely had seldom darkened a church door, and had trouble hiding their reaction to some of what you said about marriage as an image of Christ and His Church. Or maybe it was at a Lutheran school program, with its Christ-centered message, where you saw blank stares from some in the audience who were there to see and support their little one, but didn't seem to care at all about the message being presented. You can fill in the blanks and probably provide better examples, not only from your day-to-day work, but also from your everyday conversations and the other ways that you lift high the cross of Jesus Christ in your life and conduct.

“The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing.”

That word “folly,” and its cognates, occurs no less than five times in this one paragraph of Paul's epistle!

- The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing...
- God made foolish the wisdom of the world...

- The foolishness of God is wiser than men...
- Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles...
- The folly of what we preach

And with its five occurrences, Paul is saying at least a couple of different things about this concept of “folly.” First, he’s saying that the Gospel message of the cross, that we’ve been given to proclaim, appears to be foolishness to the unbelieving world. Only so much ineffective chatter. Especially when enlightened minds consider the content of what we’ve been given to preach and teach—that the divine, eternal, immortal, all-powerful Son of God became a flesh and blood man, just like us, and suffered a shameful criminal’s death on a cross to satisfy the justice of God and free all mankind from bondage to sin and everlasting death! What folly! What foolishness! It seems that way, (Paul says), because the unbelieving world has its own wisdom and is always looking for something other than the message the Lord has given us. *“Jews demand signs; Greeks seek wisdom.”*

So, what do unbelieving 21st century Americans seek today? We could probably have a great conversation about that. I’d start with the assertion that it’s not “signs” or “wisdom,” but maybe self-help for life’s problems and issues other than one’s eternal standing before his or her Creator. Maybe it’s health, wealth, and success. Maybe it’s nothing at all! (At least the Jews believed in God, and Greeks in multiple gods.) But witness today the skyrocketing rise of that unchurched segment of society called “nones,” and even of outright “atheists.” And, if the question of what is being sought by unbelieving 21st century Americans seems irrelevant to your life, I ask you: How does what the world seeks today influence even the assembly of sinner/saints that gather around your pulpits, and altars, and fonts... and in our Lutheran school communities?

“The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing,” including some of the people to whom we speak it.

But are we only to feel sorry for ourselves that “the world” counts our message as folly? Or is there reason for us also to be convicted by these words? As our theme for this conference is Luther: Living in Vocation, one of the things we’ll learn about is Luther’s vocation as pastor and preacher. And even Luther, at one point in his life, became discouraged by the seeming folly of the tremendous amount of preaching that he did at St. Mary’s Church in Wittenberg. On January 1st, 1530 Luther announced a New Year’s resolution that he was no longer going to preach because it didn’t seem to be doing any good in changing the lives and attitudes of his hearers. And, with just three exceptions, Luther actually kept that resolution for several months, all the way ‘until he got the convenient “out” of having to travel to the Coburg Castle while the Augsburg Confession was being written.

And what about you and me? Have you ever believed the lie that Satan whispers in your ear about the ineffectiveness of God’s Word that you’ve been given to preach or teach? Have you ever not taken God at His Word of promise:

- that *“faith comes from hearing?”*
- that His Word is *“living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword?”*
- that He *“will build His Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it?”*
- that *“where two or three are gathered in His name, there He is in the midst of them?”*

Yes, you and I also need, for our own sin, that same “word of the cross” and “foolishness of God” that we preach and teach to others.

The cross! Christ crucified! This is God’s precious gift to the world! Promised from the moment our first parents rebelled against their Creator and corrupted His creation. Prefigured—throughout the Old Testament—in the sacrifice of Isaac, in the bronze serpent, in countless temple sacrifices, and in many other ways. Then fulfilled in that once-for-all, world-changing event when God’s own Son gave His life into the hands of sinful men to lay it down in exchange for every sin in the whole world... so you and I and all who hear and believe and rest in those arms stretched out on the cross need no longer fear the consequence of our sin, or dread the Day of Judgement when we will stand before Holy God. Because Christ crucified stands with us, and—raised from the dead—He will stand with us on the Last Day. And by His innocent death on the cross He has already paid the otherwise unpayable debt for the sins of all!

Now, the *Word* of that cross, the *proclamation* of Christ crucified... this is God’s ongoing *gift* to the world. It’s a gift that’s been given to each of you as royal priests in the priesthood of the baptized to speak to your spouse, and children, and grandchildren, and neighbors so that they may know and experience God’s awesome power in their own lives—the power of God that frees from guilt, and heals troubled consciences, and instills a confident Christian hope for the future that only comes from being reconciled to God by the blood of Jesus. It’s that same blood of Jesus that you and I will be blessed to receive, in a few moments, for the forgiveness of our own sins—*all* our sins—including our sin of not always trusting the power and efficacy of God’s Word of the cross.

And that Word of the cross, that preaching of Christ crucified is also what the Lord of the Church has called you to proclaim publicly as ministers of His Church, and to teach to the children entrusted to us. This is the sum and substance—the very center—of everything we’ve been given to do. And in spite of it *appearing* as folly to the world, you have God’s sure and certain promise that this Word of the cross is, in fact, the power and wisdom of God!

So, don’t assume the Gospel in your ministry—your preaching or teaching. But rather, never tire of proclaiming again and again, wherever God’s Law has laid the wound bare... keep on preaching and teaching this faith-creating, sin-forgiving Word of the cross that turns the wisdom of the world on its head!

In the name of Christ crucified. Amen!