

Sermon: The Opposite of Foolishness

Year B, Lent 3

[Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:12-22](#)

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The Ten Commandments have been floating in the air today. But I haven't had them read out. I haven't put them in as bulletin insert. I didn't put them in front of you because I think we have trouble really seeing them. I give you the list and you nod your heads. Right, no killing, no stealing, no false witness. For the most part we obey them, although we all have times when we covet, when honoring our parents is harder to do. We're going to work with the Ten Commandments again next week, but for this week, I'm hoping I can get you to look at them in a different way.

Not that I think you're likely to break them. On the whole you guys are not like the church in Corinth that Paul was writing to. Corinth was a city that had been destroyed after rebelling against the Romans. It was rebuilt in part because there had to be a city there, on a ten mile stretch of land connecting two busy harbors. Because it took much longer to sail around from one harbor to the other, many people and goods landed on one side and walked over to the other. Indeed if the ship itself wasn't too big, they just put the ship and its cargo on rollers and dragged the whole thing overland. Corinth was a kind of free-wheeling place, where commerce reigned and fortunes were made. It was a natural place for Paul to go, because everyone went there eventually. It was a natural place for Christianity to spring up, because there was a little bit of everything there.

As you remember, the Corinthians were not a high functioning church. They fought all the time. People slept together who shouldn't have. People came early to the communal meals to eat more than their fair share. People boasted about the gifts of the Spirit they had been given and belittled other people who either didn't have that gift or didn't appear to have any gift at all. When someone new turned up in town with a message that suited their own desires better, they'd decide to follow them, regardless of what they had already been taught. They were a tough church.

But they did keep in touch with Paul. In the scholarship around 1st and 2nd Corinthians, there's always a battle raging about how many letters there actually were. It appears the two we have are actually multiple letters that had been edited together. But whether there were two letters or as many as nine, we know Paul cared deeply for this crazy, obstreperous church. He kept trying to get them to come to terms with the reality of Jesus' teaching.

When faced with this church that was going in every direction, surely the easiest thing to do was to spell it out in really straight forward terms. No fooling around if you aren't married. To each other. No eating until everyone is there. No bragging about how you're closer to God than someone else. If you can do this, you'll get the feel of what it means to be a Christian.

We do this with our kids, right. Don't talk with your mouthful. Don't interrupt other people. I had a friend who taught kindergarten who said that half the time she felt like the whole purpose of kindergarten was to train people how to keep quiet and stand in line. The ABCs and colors were just a bonus.

But there comes a point where we can't load them up with rules any further. They have to shift from the rules to what the rules are pointing at. Think about the commandment Thou Shall Not Murder (Exodus 20:13). Clear enough. Just about every society in the world has a taboo against murder. These past few weeks we have been talking about how best to limit access to technology which murders efficiently. We have also been talking, although perhaps not in sound bites in the media, how to see people as fully human. Think of the thousands of African American men and women lynched in this country. Think of the members of the LGBTQ community beaten to death. Think of the elderly and the children denied access to the basics of food and water until they perish in homes where they should be cared for. For those murders to take place, someone has to be seen as less than human. And sometimes, the person who wields the weapon sees themselves as less than human. If their life doesn't matter, neither can anyone else.

So if we are going to follow the commandment of not murdering, we have to be prepared to look not only at the rule, but what it is pointing at. Yes, we are called to follow God's Ten Commandments. More than that, we are called to create a society where what those Ten Commandments are pointing at is honored as well.

When you look at the first letter to the Corinthians, the weird thing for me is that Paul didn't start with the rules and shift. He starts right out pointing at the thing behind the rules. Which is interesting, given that Paul had those pretty good set of ten rules that the church at Corinth really could have benefitted from.

Paul does something pretty amazing, something that shows amazing confidence and faith in the church at Corinth. He starts right out saying the opposite of foolishness is Now the whole world will tell you the opposite of foolishness is wisdom. And if you want to get church-y about it, the wisdom of God. A great big chunk of the Hebrew Bible, the scriptures Paul knew well and loved, is called the Books of Wisdom. But Paul starts this letter out by saying the opposite of foolishness is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18).

The whole world will tell you to look over there. Jesus is telling you to look somewhere else. The whole world is telling you that you are perishing.¹ That your children are perishing. That if you want to have your name remembered, if you want to protect your children, you better grab as much control, as much money, as much dominance as you can. You better claim as much territory as you can. Because you are perishing.

Paul says to look at the cross, where Jesus perished, and realize that the reality that we are perishing is only part of the story. Look at the cross and realize that we are saved. Our money, our stuff, our territory didn't save us. Jesus saved us through God's love. And God and Jesus used the smallest, weakest, most vulnerable mechanism available to save us.

Our worldly brains didn't save us.² We didn't understand something more clearly, we didn't figure something out. We weren't saved by some new knowledge let loose in the world. We were saved because we realized there was a new power in the world.³ Doing something new.

¹ Adam E. Eckhart, "Third Sunday in Lent, Pastoral Perspective, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 90.

² Clarence T. Craig, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians: Exegesis," vol. 10 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1953), 28.

³ Craig, 28.

Coming from a different direction. Yes, we were still perishing, just as the world had been saying all along. This new power in the world said that the truth we were perishing wasn't the whole story.⁴ That there was a life beyond this one. Access to that salvation comes not from all the things you need to amass if you want to pretend you can keep yourself from perishing. Access to salvation comes from accepting this new power in the world, this new power in your life. This new power manifests itself through the least, the smallest, the most vulnerable.

Look at the Cross, Paul says. Look at how God has said we have value, value that does not change with our IQ or income.⁵ Whatever our gifts are, whether they fit with what the world says is important or not, they are precious to God because we are precious to God.⁶ Infinitely precious. And our gifts need to be used to share with the whole world this new thing that God is doing.

During Lent especially, God is calling us to recognize how the message that we are perishing tempts us to do something about it. During Lent, God is calling us to accept God's new work in the world in order to point out that that old message is insufficient. We are perishing, but it is not the whole story. The message of the cross, God's weak and foolish new hypothesis, absorbs the foolishness of the old message that we can do something to prevent perishing, absorbs that old message into the wholeness of resurrection.⁷ The opposite of foolishness is power.

⁴ Eckhart, 90.

⁵ Eckhart, 90.

⁶ Eckhart, 90.

⁷ Eckhart, 90.