**1 Corinthians 1:22-25** March 4, 2018

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 *1 Corinthians 1:22Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**God’s Weakness Does What Man’s Strength Can’t**

 There was a time when you could have a little bit of gentle fun with people’s cultural backgrounds. Of course, some hateful people would go too far, but not most. We could chuckle at the proper Englishman with all his pretentious manners, the frugal German counting every last penny, the exuberant Italian with a zest for life. We had fun with their faults, and we also had an admiration for their strengths – the Englishman’s ability to keep the stiff upper lip in bad times, the German’s ability to make a go of it even in the worst economic downturn, the Italian’s ability to enjoy and make enjoyable even little things in life.

 There was a time when we could have that sort of good-natured fun with cultures—and laugh at ourselves and our culture, too! I think that is a sign of a healthy person and a healthy society, when we can laugh at ourselves.

 But those times are gone. Political correctness has made us unable to laugh at ourselves and declared it unethical to have good-natured fun with others. When we stop laughing at ourselves and when it becomes nearly illegal to chuckle at differences in other people, we lose. We lose the ability to treasure people for who they are. We lose the ability to see who we really are. We lose the ability to speak the truth, real truth to people where they are.

 I talk about our age’s excessive sensitivity to culture for a reason. Our reading begins with an observation that would have gotten the Apostle Paul labelled a racist, a bigot, in our day. He says, ***“Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom.”*** We can hear it already: “How dare you say that?! How hateful to make a caricature of Jews and Greeks, like they are some sort of cartoon character!”

 Well, the fact is that while each of us is an individual, we all grow up in a culture. And every culture has its wonderful, distinct flavor, with strengths and weaknesses. And since the Church of Christ is made up of people, cultural strengths and weaknesses are on display within God’s church.

 Now some Bible commentators on these verses say that everyone falls into either the mistake of the Jews or the mistake of the Greeks. Either people are religious fanatics like Jews or intellectual fanatics like Greeks.

 But I don’t think that is what is going on here. I don’t think everyone either falls into the fault of the Jews or the Greeks. What I believe is happening here is that Paul is addressing the cultural forces at play among the Christians in Greek city of Corinth. Nearly all, or maybe all of them were either of a Greek or a Jewish cultural background. Paul is calling into question the cultural values of his audience.

 I believe that if the Apostle Paul had written this letter to us in our community, the Holy Spirit would have had him write something slightly different, something like: “Jews demand miraculous signs; Greeks look for wisdom; and Americans…” Americans what? What are the dearest values of American culture? To an American, what is the test of whether an idea is acceptable or not?

 There may be several answers. But here are two prominent traits of our nation’s culture: “Jews demand signs; Greeks look for wisdom; Americans… insist on individual freedom and expect success.” I think that those are two foundational American values, without which you don’t have America: individual freedom and success.

 I don’t say this to condemn our culture any more or less than this word of God condemned first century Jewish or Greek cultures. The values of any culture can be good, but they also get used in ungodly ways.

 When you hear our reading, ***“Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom;”*** what you should hear is this: ***“Jews demand miraculous signs, Greeks look for wisdom,*** Americans insist on freedom and demand success, ***but we preach Christ crucified.”*** The Christian message is different from every other culture. The Christian message demands that every culture kneels down and conforms itself to the Christian message. Jews demand this, Greeks look for that, Americans insist on the other thing, ***but we preach Christ crucified!”***

 Paul does not say that he simply preaches Christ. He doesn’t say that for a reason. People fill that word “Christ” with all sorts of meanings. Some people think of Jesus as some sort of social justice warrior. Others think of Jesus as teacher or philosopher. But that is not the Christ of the Gospel. The Christ of the Gospel is ***“Christ crucified.”*** The Christ on which the Christian Church of all times is built is *Christ crucified*. Above all else Jesus Christ came to earth to die for our sins. He healed and helped, but the reason he took on flesh was our sin, and payment for the guilt of that sin. Otherwise he would not have come! Our message must always center on Christ crucified.

 That is foolish to every culture of the world! Paul preached ***“Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”*** To the Jew the cross of Christ is not a sign of power but a sign of weakness. Jesus Christ was tortured and died on that thing. To the Greek the cross of Christ is foolishness because how can there be any wisdom in a man whose religious philosophy was rejected by anybody and everybody and who died like a slave; and what’s more, the Greek was skeptical that there was any life after death so what does it matter? To the American the cross of Christ is the opposite of freedom because Christ didn’t live out his dreams but made himself a slave to God’s will and tells me to take up my own cross. That’s not freedom! To the success oriented, the cross of Christ is the opposite of success: dead at age 33, crowds mocking him as he died, so poor he had to be buried in a borrowed grave. Those are three things not on anyone’s list for success!

 Do you understand why the cross of Christ isn’t the sort of thing people just flock to? It isn’t culturally aligned with the values of any culture on earth!

 I am not picking on American culture here. If I were in Korea I could easily point out how Korean culture is in opposition to the message of the cross. If I were in Russia I could do the same thing with Russian culture. This word of God speaks to every single culture of all times. Have we taken our values and conformed them to Christ crucified?

 And just as God’s words to the Corinthians were a rebuke to people who put cultural values ahead of God’s values, God’s words rebuke us when we put our cultural values ahead of God’s.

 Sure we can condemn the Jews who came to Jesus and said, “Show us a sign!” like they did after he cleansed the temple in our Gospel reading. Sure we can condemn the Greeks with their philosophical outlook that demanded that all truth fit into an organized rationalistic philosophy. But are we brave enough to condemn ourselves when we insist on freedoms that really are not God pleasing freedoms? When our sense of freedom leads us to disrespect people whom God wants us to show respect to, can we admit the fault? When we try to meet our culture’s expectations of success at the expense of compromising on faith issues, can we confess the sin? Can we see the plank in our own eyes, or are we only professionals at picking out specks of sawdust from other people’s eyes? Are we only good at criticizing other cultures, the permissiveness of some people, the oppressiveness of others, the work righteousness of some religions, the decision theology of other Christians? Are we so sure of the superiority of our outlook, that we never feel a tension between our culture and God’s desires?

 As Paul was leading the Corinthians to do, so too we must confess as sin our surrenders to cultural expectations. We have been called into a Christ culture. This word of God would have us examine *our own personal lives* and ask where the pinch points are with a true Christ culture. God would have us look at Christ, the wisdom, the power, the success, the freedom of God, and fall down at his feet in worship and offer our lives to him who has given up all things for us.

 I am not telling anyone to give up their cultural heritage any more than Paul told the Corinthians to stop being Jews or Greeks. But where our culture and the principles of God’s word are in opposition, we know which one must take first place, every single time.

 But listen to what this message of Christ does, this message that the world has branded as foolish, weak, unsuccessful message: ***“The foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.”*** What people measure as the foolishness and weakness of God—the cross—is in fact the point of power and wisdom that mankind has been striving for!

 Think about how “Christ crucified” supplies what our cultures unsuccessfully try to supply!

 Christ crucified is the power of God. Seven billion people striving to make themselves acceptable to God cannot save a single soul. But Christ saved them all on the cross in one day. That is the power of God.

 Christ crucified is the wisdom of God. Over the centuries every single human philosophy has failed and been replaced by another, because none can solve the human condition. Christ crucified solves all the problems of life.

 Christ is the freedom of God. People think of the Ten Commandments as slavery to God. But in Christ we learn to love God’s will, and we find that God’s commandments free us to live regret-free lives, lives devoted to God and others.

 Christ crucified is the success of God because he gives us a contentment that nothing in this world can give.

 Keep your eyes open. Look at the different people of the world around you. Enjoy them for who they are, and yourself for who God has made you. Yet so that we can ever be the apple of God’s eye, may we never be blinded to our own faults. May God wake us to our failings, to our culture’s failings, so that we ever rely on Christ Crucified and find in him the answer to our world’s quest for power and wisdom, freedom and success, and whatever else they are looking for. Christ crucified alone! Amen.