

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Epistle, Year A

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Analysis by Bruce K Modahl

18For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

20Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

26Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and

redemption, 31in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

DIAGNOSIS: Spiritual Gifts under the Law

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): A Spiritually-Gifted Community

Paul's letters (with one exception) follow the social conventions of their day. Paul begins with what we put in the upper left corner of the envelope and what we write in the middle. Instead of continuing the letter with news about the weather, Paul continued with several verses of flattery. He tells them for what it is about his readers that he gives thanks to God. At least for Paul this section serves as a table of contents for the letter. The reader will discover as the chapters unfold the very things for which Paul gives thanks to God are the things that Paul writes to tell them where and how they have gone astray.

Paul recognized they "have been enriched in speech and knowledge of every kind." They are "not lacking in any spiritual gift." Paul acknowledged they were a very spiritual people. It has been long years since I heard the lecture or was it a sermon. I do not remember. Neither do I remember where I was or who was speaking. But I do remember the claim that it is at the point we are most gifted that we are most vulnerable. I have heard the claim that a broken bone grows together stronger than before the break. People apply that aphorism to all aspects of our life: We are most strong at the broken places of our lives. There is an equal but opposite and more-likely-to-be-true aphorism that is not yet a cliché: We are most vulnerable at the places we are most gifted. This certainly was the case at First Church Corinth. It hardly seems being spiritually gifted could be a problem. However, in the chapters to come Paul unfolds how this is true in many aspects of their life together. The way it was

most obvious is they no longer had much of a life together.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Our Group Is More Spiritual than Hers

Under the law, it is inevitable that we will use God's gifts as a way to hoist ourselves up in order to get ahead of others on the up escalator. Wisdom and rhetorical skills were particularly valued in Greek culture. Rhetoric and Wisdom were the currency needed to achieve status. Status was the overarching value of the culture in which God embedded this outcropping of his kingdom.

A number of competing groups developed in the church of Corinth. It appears all of them succumbed to the temptation to rely on their spiritual gifts to obtain status not only over one another but also before God. They clung to and put their faith in their ability rather than in Christ's crucifixion. They sought to gain acceptance among the culture in which they were embedded. The culture in which they lived regarded the cross as shameful and any talk about resurrection as foolishness. The people in the congregation feared, loved, and trusted status rather than God. And so, they emptied the cross of its power.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (External Problem): Those Who Are Perishing

Paul makes clear to the reader the two paths open to us. "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. The message of the cross is the wisdom and the power of God to us who are being saved." Perishing and being saved, by the very grammar Paul uses, are a process. The final judgment is spelled out in v. 28: "God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are."

PROGNOSIS: Spiritual Gifts under the Gospel

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Those Who Are

Being Saved

Look who joins the procession of those who are perishing. It is none other than the Incarnate Logos of God. The world did not recognize him. The world despised him instead. Jesus not only joined the procession of those being reduced to nothing; he perished on the cross. One cannot get lower than the grave unless it be a descent into hell. He was reduced to nothing so that God might make something out of him. What God made out of Jesus is death's destroyer. He did so to save from death those who are perishing. Perhaps in Jesus' day as in ours an off-color attack upon a person is to tell them, "Go to hell." Scripture tells us that people stood around the cross deriding and insulting him. I can imagine some of them calling out, "Go to hell Jesus." Jesus did. Descending was not part of his humiliation but a part of his triumph. He broke down the gates of hell. Because of Jesus neither sin, death, nor the devil have the final word in our lives.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Receiving and Using Spiritual Gifts

Paul invites his readers to consider our call. The Holy Spirit calls us to believe in Jesus Christ our Lord and come to him. The Holy Spirit calls us to faith by the gospel. We receive the spiritual gift of forgiveness. We are called to put the gift to work. Confident of the promised gift we turn to God and repent of boasting in our own achievements. Such boasting brings with it the smugness by which we look down on those with less and with resentment of those who have more. Boasting also alienates us from our friends and most significantly from our friendship with God. We grow sick to death of our own boasting. Jesus asks us to hand these sins over to him. In this gift exchange Jesus wants our sins. In their place he gives us new causes for boasting: his forgiveness, his righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

There are two items which give us more reason to trust God's promised forgiveness. In baptism, a sacrament of water and Word, the Holy Spirit joins us to Jesus. Joined to Jesus we make it with him from death to God's new creation. The Spirit endeavors to keep the togetherness going by the Word. In Holy Communion, a sacrament of wine and bread, in, with, and under are Jesus' body and blood. When we come for the Lord's Supper we hear that Christ endured death and the grave for the forgiveness of our sins.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): A Spiritually-Gifted Community

Paul reveals a number of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 1:18-30. One gift is discerning the true wisdom of God from the foolishness which the world regards as wisdom. He also reminds us of the gift to distinguish those who are perishing and those who are being saved. He reminds us of the call we have from God to proclaim the cross. God gives us true wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. Through Christ God gives us the gift of practicing forgiveness with one another. In my experience, it is more difficult to do this with others than it is with God. Perhaps that is because I am certain of God's promises to forgive. I have not had any such promise from my neighbor. In my experience seeking reconciliation is also difficult because it requires that I humble myself and become vulnerable to their criticism.

[If you have the time and are so inclined watch the movie "Get Low," starring Robert Duval and Cissy Spacek. The character played by Duval lived most of his adult life as a hermit. He arrived at old age and decided the time has come for him to get low before his neighbors. It is a fitting example of one man's attempt at reconciliation and vulnerability.]