

“Glorious Success or Tragic Failure?”

Sermon by DD Adams

Providence United Methodist Church

Third Sunday in Lent

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The epistle lesson for today is taken from 1 Corinthians, chapter one, verses 18 through 25. I'll be reading from the New Revised Standard Version. For 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. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' Where 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? For 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.

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. This is God's word for God's people. Thanks be to God. Lord touch the reading, hearing, and understanding of your word today. Let it be for someone here new life. Amen.

The Apostle Paul lived during the time when the Greek culture was predominant in the Roman Empire. People sought wisdom and entertained different philosophies. Greeks had a great love for wisdom, and in the city of Corinth there were scores of philosophies where truth was investigated. There were

many Greeks who were believers. They would talk and relate their viewpoints to their friends in the church—nothing unusual about that. People will converse with their friends and seek perspectives that bring comfort and certainty to their lives.

For some people, the message of the cross was too foolish to believe. The Apostle Paul dealt with that. He arrived in Corinth about twenty years after the crucifixion of Christ and preached the gospel. The gospel was the message of the cross—the death and resurrection of Jesus. It was challenging to believe. The cross was a scandalous thing. It was a form of capital punishment. It brought to mind criminals and those guilty of a great offense.

Paul contrasts two kinds of people in this passage. Some are pursuing a path and branded as “those who are perishing,” (1:18), and the others are following God and are part of the group known as “those who are being saved.” Which group are you a part of? Maybe you stand on the edges of the crowd and are undecided as to what you believe. What does the death of Christ and his resurrection mean to you? How does it affect your life? Does it mean your life will be a success story or a tragic failure?

Often we hide our real thoughts from others. We’re afraid of being excluded, we may have doubts, or we fear being labeled. Maybe your family members are unbelievers or gave up on God. Maybe your significant other is a believer, and you never told them what you question about the message of the cross. You’re standing on the edges undecided. You never decided to dive in to faith in Christ.

The two groups are in opposition to each other—those who are perishing, and those who are being saved. Maybe you just can’t accept that Christ died for your sin and was resurrected. It’s too simple. It’s too basic. And if Christ died for me, how did the sin get from me to Jesus anyway? But it’s true. Jesus took

our sin and pardoned it. But each of us must take that responsibility . . . on our own . . . to receive the gift of eternal life.

It seems foolish to believe that Jesus died for the sin of the world. It seems almost laughable that God would allow such a thing to happen. Some people today look at the cross as a piece of jewelry to wear. But to those who are “being saved” the message of the cross is what set them free from their sin. They didn’t see any other way. They tried everything. Nothing worked . . . until . . . they decided to trust in Christ as their Savior. It’s a message that says Christ died for me—yes for me—and for you.

Believers aren’t ashamed of the message of the cross. It’s transforming their lives. For those “who are perishing” the message is offensive and repulsing. Someone on the edges of professing faith in Christ thinks, “How could the death and resurrection of God’s Son possibly forgive my sin? How could it give me eternal life?” Let me ask you, is the death and resurrection of Christ something you profess in faith . . . on your own . . . or are you professing your momma’s faith? Have you claimed it as part of your own story? Here’s a story.

There was a man and his family who came up to a large crowd at the edge of a town. The noise from the crowd was massive. Dust was spinning up into the air. It was falling down on over everyone. People were shouting insults, spitting, throwing stones, laughing, and making fun of what was happening. The man and his family watched from a distance. Soon they became curious and wanted to get a better look, but they didn’t want to leave the safety of the edge of the crowd.

The man and his family kept thinking, “Maybe it isn’t safe to break through to get a glimpse of what’s going on. Maybe we should just stay on the outskirts. Maybe we should just stay on the edges. If we don’t get too committed for or

against whatever is going on we'll be safer. And anyway, becoming radical for anything can be really dangerous.

The crowd was focused and continued to hurl insults. The intensity was growing and getting larger. The crowd got meaner, and they heard everyone joining in and yelling at a man who claimed to be God. There was so much pressure to join in and be like everyone else. The man and his family considered trying to stop those who were throwing stones at the one who claimed to be the Son of God, but the crowd was too insistent. The family was afraid. They recognized some of the people in the crowd. It was their neighbors, business associates, and extended family members. They felt so alone.

If the man and his family tried to stop the stoning and get on God's side everyone might see them and treat them the same way as they treated God's Son. So they decided to just believe that this man who claimed to be God's son was not. For this family, what was going on that day outside the town was a tragic failure. They felt like that *same dust* that the wind blew down on them. They were covered in it. They thought about eternity. Was it real? Were they just one drop of water in an endless sea? Or were they loved by the Son of God who gave his life for them?

They stayed on the edges. The man who claimed to be God's Son—was he really? By staying on the edge of the crowd the family never got a good look. They never really experienced who and what this supposed Son of God was doing or would do. But then the family saw it. The man who claimed to be God's Son had been nailed to a cross and lifted up. Everyone there said it was foolishness. The family never decided who this man really was who was crucified. They never made up their mind. They stayed on the edges.

What do you say? Have you decided for yourself who Jesus Christ is *for you*? Is it part of *your story*? Will the message of the cross be a glorious success

story for you or will it be a tragic failure? Let's pray. Jesus, move your Holy Spirit among us today. You've prepared and informed each mind. So we pray for you to engage each heart in a new way that brings forth a change—a change that wells up to new life. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.