Sunday January 22, 1978

"ARE WE FOOLISH ENOUGH?" I Corinthians 1:18-25

The Apostle Paul at one point wrote to the church in Corinth, "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

To be called foolish by someone is usually taken as an insult. It can mean we are senseless, idiotic, silly, shallow, absurd, stupid or dull. But here is the Apostle Paul telling us that the foolishness of God is wiser than our wisdom and the weakness of God stronger than what we normally think of as strength. Because God's ways are different, they seem foolish to us.

In other words, Paul is really saying what the prophet Isaiah said long before Paul lived. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."

God does things differently than we would do them and thus God's ways often seem foolish to us.

Wouldn't we think it foolish to propose the save the world by coming in a baby at Bethlehem? Do not the ways of the world deem it foolish that we are saved by a dying man on a cross? Paul is saying that the foolishness of God which is greater than our wisdom is God's act of redemption in Jesus Christ.

To be saving the world in such a strange way is a judgment against all our wise ways. God's foolishness in coming in Jesus Christ wasn't a very practical thing to do.

To show how foolish it seems, listen to this description of Jesus Christ written by an unknown author. No doubt you've heard it many times before.

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village not rich in heroic names. He had neither formal learning nor money wealth. He worked in a carpenter's shop until he was 30, and then for about three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book, he never held an office, he never owned a home, he never had a family, he never went to

college. He never put his foot inside a big city. He never traveled more than 200 miles from where he was born. He led no army. He wrote no music. The historians of his time thought him unworthy of mention. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but God in heaven and himself.

While he was still a young man, the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. His closest followers denied him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth and that was his coat. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. To some he was a fanatic, to others a dreamer of dreams.

Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of the human race and the leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that were ever built and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of human beings upon this earth as that one solitary life.

The foolishness of God is wiser than our wisdom! God's foolishness as seen in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, causes us to ask ourselves--Are we foolish enough in the right way?

Do we trust enough in God's expression of love as the most powerful force in the world? We pay honor to the foolishness of God, but so often we guide our steps by other kinds of foolishness. We are certain that the worldly wisdom of what we call practical people is better than the foolishness of trusting in God's love. But God's foolishness makes us ask; are we foolish enough to risk loving and being loved in return?

Are we foolish enough to also risk failure? It is better to fail at doing something, than to succeed in doing nothing. Not being afraid to risk failure is also part of the foolishness of God.

Thus it is that some of the greatest stories in history are of those who were not afraid to risk failure. The

story of one of America's greatest statesman is the story of one who was not afraid to risk failure. He failed in business in 1831, was defeated for the State Legislature in 1832, again failed in business in 1833, was elected to the State Legislature in 1834. His sweetheart died in 1835, and he had a nervous breakdown in 1836. He was defeated for Speaker in 1838, was defeated for Elector in 1840, and was defeated for Congress in 1843. Finally he was elected for one term in Congress in 1846, only to be defeated again for Congress in 1848. He was defeated for the Senate in 1855, and was defeated for Vice-President in 1856. He was defeated for the Senate again in 1858. Finally in 1860, he was elected President of the United States. These were just a few of the rough spots in the life of Abraham Lincoln.

The fields of science, medicine and industry are filled with people who had the right kind of foolishness, the foolishness to risk failure. Admiral Robert E. Perry determined to reach the North Pole and claim it for the United States. Seven times he started out. Seven times he failed. The eighth time after incredible hardships he made it. He spent 23 years in pursuit of his goal and reached it at the age of 53.

In addition to being foolish enough to risk failure, we need to be foolish enough to argue with success. One of the most common cliches of our time and one of the most misleading is the statement, "You can't argue with success." But why shouldn't we argue with success? It's the only thing worth arguing with.

The person who won't argue with success has already been corrupted without knowing it. He or she accepts the world at face value. It was the duty of decent Germans to argue with the success of a Hitler. It was the duty of good Russians to argue with the success of the Soviet dictatorship. It is the duty of good people everywhere to argue with the success of all violence and fraud and greed and inhumanity. Success is the one thing in the world that must be questioned; that cannot be accepted without the proper credentials of morality. From the Ten Commandments to the Sermon on the Mount, the Bible insists that the mighty shall be toppled when their ways are wicked. The weakness of God is stronger than our strength.

Are we foolish enough to risk love as God does on our behalf? We need that kind of foolishness in our lives!

Are we foolish enough to risk failure? That too is the kind of foolishness we need! At the same time, are we foolish enough to argue with success? We also need that kind of foolishness!

In addition to these kinds of foolishness, are we also foolish enough to risk doubt and not be afraid of it? That too is a part of the right kind of foolishness. All too often we are afraid of doubt and uncertainty and thus we make believe we know it all. We mask our doubts by being stubborn in our beliefs. But the Apostle Paul reminds us "that now we see in a mirror dimly." We never know all there is to know about anything.

Unfortunately in our time there has returned in the field of religion the way of dogmatism--Christians saying that unless you are a Christian in the way in which I define the faith, you are not a Christian. Unless you express your faith in a certain way and use certain words, you are not one of the saved. It's a way for many to cover up their own doubts.

That kind of attitude is not new in the world. Jesus Christ had to deal with it even within the circle of his 12 chosen disciples. Over 30 years ago, Harry Emerson Fosdick preached against this kind of dogmatism. In one sermon he quoted from a Church paper which said, "Baptists have the whole truth. Nobody else has. West Kentucky Baptists come nearer standing for the whole truth and all the truth, than any other set of Baptists in this round world." Fosdick went on to comment, "Ah, you West Kentucky Baptists, how the world has waited for you! Even East Kentucky Baptists, marvelous as they are, have never discovered the truth of life as you have!"

Unfortunately the spirit of the West Kentucky Baptists of some 30 years ago is not dead nor is it confined to West Kentucky. It is alive and well across the country and is the same kind of attitude the Apostle Paul saw the Greeks as having in his time. There were so wise in their dogmatism--so wise that the message of Jesus Christ--God coming in the flesh, God loving us, even dying for us was foolishness.

What we need to remember is that in today's world as throughout the history of the Christian Church, no one brand or denomination or group of Christians has a corner

on the whole truth. There is so much we don't know. What we need to be is open, seeking persons.

There is a depth in God and a depth in life and the world. Thus all truth is deep and not shallow. Therefore we should also not be too quick to condemn the person who is having trouble believing in God. It may be our own dogmatism, or shallowness, or coldness or avarice or materialism and sensuality and selfishness that have killed his or her faith.

There is more mystery and depth in the foolishness of God, than in all our worldly wisdom. So it is that God's foolishness as seen in the cross of Jesus Christ calls us to also have some of that foolishness. Be foolish enough to risk loving and being loved. Be foolish enough to risk failure. Be foolish enough to question success. Be foolish enough not to be afraid of doubt and mystery. Be foolish enough to love your enemies and to bless those who persecute you. Be foolish enough to believe Jesus Christ when he said, "If any person would come after me, let him or her deny himself and take up the cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."