

FIRST CORINTHIANS 1:26–31. (EHV)

For example, consider your call, brothers. Not many of you were wise from a human point of view, not many were powerful, and not many were born with high status. But God chose the foolish things of the world to put to shame those who are wise. God chose the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are strong, and God chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to do away with the things that are, so that no one may boast before God. But because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us the wisdom from God, namely, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. God did this so that, just as it is written, “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord” [Jeremiah 9:24].

“That’s preposterous!”

I don’t know if anyone has ever said that to you in response to an idea you’ve had or a story you’ve told. But if they have, it wasn’t a compliment. *Preposterous* comes from two Latin words. The first word is *prae*, which means *before* or *in front of*. We’re essentially using that word whenever we have *pre* in front of another word, like *pre-fab*, “constructed beforehand, rather than built on site,” *pre-owned*, “owned beforehand by someone else, rather than brand new,” or *pre-Stan*, meaning “many, many years before this one.” The second word is *posterus*, which means *coming after* or *future*. It’s the word we get *posterity* from—those coming after us.

So when you say “preposterous,” you’re literally saying, “before-after” or “past-future.” It’s kind of the same as saying “upside-down.” So if someone says your idea is preposterous, he’s saying it’s backwards or ridiculous or nonsense. If someone says the story you’ve told is preposterous, it means it’s so absurd that it can’t be true; you must have gotten the story wrong.

In our text this morning, Paul tells us about the preposterous wisdom of God—the way he operates that seems completely backwards. But Paul will show us it’s only preposterous to our human reason; in reality it is the best and greatest way for him to operate.

Paul begins this section with the words, “For example,” which prompts the question: What is he providing an example of? Paul has been talking about how the Christian church isn’t based on human wisdom, such as sound business practices. It is based only on a seemingly foolish message about a God who took on the nature of his human creatures and suffered and died on a cross in utter humiliation for them. Yet it is with this message that God destroys the wisdom of those who are wise in the world’s eyes and brings to nothing the intelligence of those who are intelligent in the world’s eyes. Their intelligent statements and rules and theories are eventually challenged, modified, or overturned. In the meantime, the “foolish” gospel remains the same from generation to generation and spreads around the world, giving hope, peace, and life.

The Jews ask for signs, Paul says, and the Greeks desire wisdom. In other words, some want a magic show and some want a TED talk or impressive seminar. But we preach Christ crucified, because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

And now Paul gives his example of that: “Consider your call, brothers.” That is, consider the circumstances under which God called you from unbelief to faith. “Not many of you were

wise from a human point of view, not many were powerful, and not many were born with high status.” Paul isn’t saying that Christians are never wise from a human point of view or powerful or of high social standing. Paul himself was an extraordinarily intelligent man with an excellent education. Constantine was an emperor who converted to Christianity. On the way to the pastors’ conference last week, Pastor Henning was telling us about one of his sons, who is a pastor in Wisconsin. His son’s church is wanting to build an expansion. One of his son’s members, a woman, approached him and said, “Well, we obviously don’t have the space to do what we want to do. Here’s \$2 million. Get the expansion built.” She is obviously a Christian of high social standing.

But all of those people are the exception, not the rule. As a rule, the Christians in Corinth were pretty ordinary people. As a rule, the apostles Christ called to follow him and then to share the gospel were pretty ordinary men. As a rule, Christians are still pretty ordinary people. Paul could tell his audience to consider their call, because most of them were converted to Christianity as adults. For most of us, the answer to, “What were you when you were called?” would be, “I was a baby.” This also underscores the point Paul was making, since besides being cute babies don’t really contribute much to society as babies. But we could still ask ourselves, “What if I were converted today, instead of at the baptismal font?”

Are you particularly wise by popular human standards? Are you powerful? Do you have high social status? And even if you are those things in Winner, does that help you anywhere else? We’re generally pretty ordinary people—farmers, ranchers, nurses, teachers, students, clerks, office workers, contractors, machine operators, mechanics, county workers, city workers, janitors, cleaners, stay-at-home moms, and the like—jobs and positions that make the world go around, to be sure, but not jobs and positions that make us stand out in the world.

And yet, “God chose the foolish things of the world to put to shame those who are wise. God chose the weak things of the world to put to shame those that are strong, and God chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to do away with the things that are.” In other words, God’s wisdom and ways are preposterous. He goes about things backwards from the way we would naturally expect.

This is a general truth that we could talk about in a general, worldly way. Every year my wife and I go to a cafe in Gregory to buy our Christmas tree, and we also eat lunch there. Every year there is a Christmas-themed chalk mural on the wall done by an artist who lives in little Fairfax east of Bonesteel. She also did two chalk murals at Daybreak Village here in town this year. I’d put her work up against any I’ve seen for accuracy, impression, use of color, warmth, and charm, and she lives in Fairfax.

I would put the tastiest meals in the fanciest restaurants up against my grandma’s chicken breasts poached in butter and the annual benefit dinner in the Clearfield town hall any day of the week.

The world looks at towns tucked away in the remote corners of the Plains as backwater towns in the middle of nowhere filled with unsophisticated country bumpkins. But in reality, they’re the hubs of life on earth. I’m admittedly painting with a broad brush here, but it’s in places like those that you will most consistently find families that love each other, honest workers, breathtaking generosity, common sense that’s actually common, and stories that will make you laugh till your sides ache or bring a tear to your eye.

Don't ask the world where the best life is, or even where the best talent is. It doesn't have a clue. God chose the foolish, the weak, and the lowly things of the world to put to shame the wise, the strong, and the exalted.

But Paul is obviously applying this general truth to the spiritual realm, to the Church. And there it is especially true. Some of the worst religious books I've read were New York Times Bestsellers, praised by people of renown, even people who claimed to be Christian. Oh, they were interesting and well-written; I probably could have read the books in one sitting if I wanted to. But they were worthless for learning about God.

Some of you purchased the special pictorial history published by our synod to commemorate its 175th anniversary. One of the controversies it covers was the Protestant Controversy, which took place in the late 1920s. The Protestant Controversy is hard to describe and sum up, because it wasn't really a doctrinal controversy. It was basically ministers of the gospel, both pastors and teachers, behaving badly and refusing to apologize. I've read quite a bit of literature about the controversy and from the controversy, and the best analysis of the controversy I've read that was written while the controversy was taking place was written not by anyone with a formal theological education, not by any of our synod's leaders, but by a farmer, who lived in rural Globe, Wisconsin—and Globe itself is already rural. Today Globe is basically just a church and parsonage. This farmer regularly read the Bible after chores, especially in winter, and could quote the Bible well. He read it so often, that he once fell asleep near the window with his magnifying glass on the Bible on his lap, and the sun shone through the glass and his Bible started smoking. I'd be willing to bet good money that most of the main characters in the Protestant Controversy who had a formal theological education weren't in any danger of their Bible starting on fire on their laps.

None of you are going to be interviewed by National Geographic about the origins of the world, and yet if you know Genesis 1 and 2, you know worlds more than any syllable they have ever uttered on the subject.

When the Pilate Stone was discovered in 1961, the experts said, "We can now confirm that Pontius Pilate existed." And Christians shook their heads and went, "What are you talking about?" When the Dead Sea Scrolls, the first manuscripts of the Old Testament known to the modern world that predated Christ, were discovered in the 1940s, the experts said, "It turns out that the Old Testament Scriptures were not tampered with over the centuries as much as we thought." And Christians shook their heads and went, "What are you talking about?"

In Wisconsin I ministered to an autistic man in his forties named Cory. I would read him a couple Curious George stories, which he would basically recite along in their entirety while looking out the window, and then I would read a Bible story, say a prayer, and sing a couple songs, including "Jesus Loves Me." And he would bounce his head along happily and sometimes sing along. If Cory is still living, I guarantee he is wiser and happier than any non-Christian guru giving you expert advice on how to live a happy life. For that matter, he is probably happier than most of us. He's cracked the secret, simply by knowing and trusting Jesus.

All of this is preposterous, but it is the preposterous wisdom of God.

And why does God operate preposterously like this? "God chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to do away with the things that are, so

that no one may boast before God. But because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us the wisdom from God, namely, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. God did this so that, just as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.’”

The wise, intelligent, strong, and exalted of this world cannot boast before God, because they’re not actually as wise, intelligent, strong, and exalted as they think they are. And those who are actually wise, strong, and exalted in the Lord’s eyes, namely believers in Christ, cannot boast, first, because not many of them are wise, intelligent, strong, and exalted from a human point of view, and second, even those that realize that they only walk in the light because God called them out of the darkness with the seemingly foolish message of Christ crucified. Our call into his kingdom had nothing to do with us and everything to do with God—his strength, his high status, his wisdom, his preposterous wisdom. We cannot boast, because everything we have to boast about—the fact that we know the one true God and the only way to heaven, and the fact that we know we are on that way—we must give credit to God for. We can only boast in the Lord.

So thank God that his wisdom is preposterous, that he operates completely backwards from the way our human reason thinks he should, that he turns worldly intelligence, wisdom, strength, fame, and status on its head. It is because of that preposterous wisdom that we lowly sinners are in Christ, that we know the truth, that we are righteous, sanctified, and redeemed. Do not boast in yourselves. Boast in him, and in his preposterous, saving wisdom. Amen.