

**“Reclaiming the World”**  
a message by Dr. Bruce Havens  
based on the theme, “LIVING THE QUESTIONS”  
**Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.**  
**March 15, 2009**

**1 Corinthians 1:18-31 [ NRSV ]**

<sup>18</sup>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.

<sup>19</sup>For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

<sup>20</sup>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? <sup>21</sup>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.

<sup>22</sup>For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup>but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup>but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, “Christ - the power of God and the wisdom of God.” <sup>25</sup>For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

<sup>26</sup>Consider 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. <sup>27</sup>But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup>God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup>so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

<sup>30</sup>He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, <sup>31</sup>in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

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**I** have been meditating on foolishness and wisdom – of the human and divine varieties – ever since I read this passage. It seems quite true that human wisdom is often foolishness. Our theme from *Living the Questions* is “Reclaiming the World.” That might sound rather foolish right now since we could say it was our attempts at *claiming* the world that got us into this foolishness anyway. But maybe it is a good time to explore the paradox of faithful living.

We wanted satisfaction so we tried to claim the world environmentally but we have ended up with estimates that 10,000 species are going extinct each year. In our desire to increase our satisfaction in our lifestyles we have ended up being hostages to dead dinosaurs rotting in the ground under the deserts of the Middle East, and to fanatics who use terrorism to achieve their version of religious purity. Whether one buys into theories of “global warming” or not, I don’t think any of us believes we can claim we have been

good stewards of the earth. Our wisdom has proven to be foolishness.

We wanted security so we claimed the world economically and we rode the Gordon Gecko Greed Express to the twin cities of Recession-apolis and St. de-Pression. We wanted to own our “Piece of the Rock” so we charged our cards to the limit and stood amazed as the bankers sent us a half dozen offers a week to add to our collection of Visas and Mastercards. We wanted to have luxury so we jiggered the facts on our mortgage applications and stood stunned as the banks fought to overfund us. In our desire for luxury we bought those bigger homes, then our sense of security was crushed under the loan payments.

But, wait, worse than that, we lost all sense of family as our children went off to their rooms to play video games, spend hours on Facebook, cell phones, ipods and other toys that simply made them and us lonelier and less connected as a family. We wanted the satisfaction of a better lifestyle and we have ended up fearing we might lose any style we may have had. We contracted what one commentator calls “affluenza” and it has not given us any security at all. And those of us who couldn’t afford all that stuff felt bad, or worthless, or resented those who could. Or we believed the lie we could achieve it if we would just trust the economic wisdom of this or that particular political party. Our wisdom has turned to the dust of foolishness in our mouths faster than a bad Cabernet.

We wanted most of all the selfishness of “I-ness” and lost all sense of “we-ness.” The saddest victim of our

current cultural dilemma is that we have virtually lost all sense of “being in this together.” We wanted our space and in the end we ended up so separated from our neighbors that we don’t know their names or care about their situations and they don’t know or care about us. We lived by the factions the political operators have injected into our public arena. We operated under the foolish wisdom that ignores John Donne’s reminder, “no man is an island unto himself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” In our isolation and alienation from others we have dismissed those who are suffering as foolish, welfare moochers, and deserving of their own fate. Isn’t it ironic that in our foolishness our wisdom has come around now so that the same can be said of us?

Are you feeling small enough now? Have I crushed you just a little bit with my diatribe? Oh, this is too easy for a preacher! I can scoff and scold and sneer at our foolishness all morning! But that isn’t the way to reclaim the world. True, it is perhaps the way to begin, but it is only a beginning. Martin Copenhaver relates a story in the UCC daily “e-votionals” that maybe helps us see the wisdom of getting smaller. He says, “I gather that when Theodore Roosevelt was president, he used to entertain naturalist William Beebe at his home at Sagamore Hill. After the evening’s conversation the two would go out on the lawn and gaze up at the sky. Then one or the other would ritually recite, “That is the Spiral Galaxy of Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It has a hundred million suns, each

larger than our own.’ After an interval, Roosevelt would grin at Beebe and say, ‘Now I think we’re small enough. Let’s go to bed.’ Copenhaver adds, “Every once in a while it is good to be reminded of just how small we are. But there is a second reminder that is just as important: God loves small things, perhaps most of all.” So now let us think about the immensity of small things, the wisdom of foolish things and the weak way to reclaim the world.

I believe the now maybe overused proverb about the Chinese word crisis applies better than ever. I have heard it said that it is made up of the symbols from two other words: danger and opportunity. That seems an apt description of our times. We have to decide if we are going to continue to live dangerously, to count on human wisdom, or if we are going to take the opportunity to go in a different direction and seek out God’s foolishness. Right now the intersection between human wisdom and God’s foolishness seems like a very good point to stop and ask ourselves which direction are we going?

Paul says that God’s foolishness is found in believing in “Christ crucified.” Notice he doesn’t say “Christ risen.” Much as we might think of the resurrection as somehow being proof of God’s wisdom, Paul points instead to Christ crucified. He invites us to consider the sacrifice that seems pointedly pointless, painfully prodigal, and powerfully powerless. Let me say a word about these three phrases that sound so paradoxical.

The sacrifice that Christ made on the cross seems pointedly pointless. To the wise person Christ’s sacrifice seems pointless. He could have avoided it altogether by not going around riling up the religious and political status quo. “Go along to get along,” says the wise person of our day. Let the “powers that be” determine what’s best, or in our economic parlance, let the market determine what’s best. Yet, we have found out that the market, unchecked, doesn’t always do what’s best for the economy, let alone for the individual who ends up losing his job, his home, and perhaps his hope in our current economic situation. Often in times like these we see clearly that what seemed like the most important thing in the world, having more, was actually pointless.

But Christ’s sacrifice, his choice to offend the complacent, challenge the comfortable, and provoke those profiting from injustices was pointed. He chose to do it knowing the consequences. Rome was clear about its unwillingness to put up with foolishness. Its reminders hung on crosses all along the Imperial interstates. But clearly Christ understood God’s foolishness to be wiser. He said God chose the small rather than the big. He invoked God’s call for us “big” people to include the outcast, love the unlovable, do what was right for the one who no government official would pay attention to, and recognize God’s love for those others call small. From the point of view of human wisdom it was a pointless exercise in pointing out the difference between our foolishness and God’s wisdom. Paul says that, to those who

believe in God's purposes, though, it was a demonstration of God's wisdom and power.

By almost any human assessment Christ's crucifixion was painfully prodigal. Prodigal means wasteful, as in the prodigal son, who went off and wasted his father's inheritance. It was a waste to have such a good man executed, even if you weren't particularly sure he was spiritually unique. Why, according to human wisdom he could have conserved himself and lived a long life as a sage – explaining all those puzzling parables and healing all the hurting, feeding all the hungry, and blessing all the outcasts. It certainly would have saved us from having to do the heavy lifting now would it not?

If Christ had just avoided the cross then maybe he wouldn't be asking us to do take up our own and follow him. Perhaps then we wouldn't be expected to attend to all this justice and compassion stuff. And talk about painful? The pain of the cross was just a waste by any measure of human wisdom wasn't it? Who of us that has suffered didn't wish it would just go away? Yet, God's foolishness seems to suggest that somehow God was wiser to enter into our pain with us rather than just sweep it away with a magic wand. Talk about divine mysteries. Surely the problem of pain is one where God's foolishness takes greater wisdom than we have.

Finally, it is clear that Christ crucified was powerfully powerless. To human wisdom the cross is the most powerless reality possible. God, in his foolishness, chose it as the sign of God's

ultimate power. Not power to punish, not to gain retribution, or even expiation, or atonement or any of those theological words. It was God's power to be with us as one who is powerless in our powerlessness. When we face the fears of losing everything God is with us in the dark night, not just as an observer, but as an absorber. God as the sponge – who soaks in the brine with us, is the power of God to be present in all of our foolishness and even our rare moments of wisdom. The cross endures as a sign of hope and that may be its greatest power. If God can find power in the powerlessness of the cross then there is hope that in our foolishness we might find wisdom.

Paul says it begins when we realize that God chose us even though we are weak and foolish enough to believe we are strong and wise. He says God chose us, weak and foolish as we are, to shame the mighty and the wise. So here is one more irony, one more reversal, one more paradox. As long as we feel we are wise and mighty God will keep choosing what we see as weak and foolish to shame us into seeing how small we are. Maybe then we can see we are at a *cross*-road and have a decision to make. Will we keep claiming the world is ours or will we reclaim our place in the world – as God's people in God's world. It isn't all that bad a thing to be is it? Sometimes it is good to remember that God loves small things, maybe most of all! AMEN.