

## **Wisdom, Stumbling Blocks and Foolishness – 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22**

Imagine, we are standing on the shore looking over a set of difficult rapids, Birch Rapids on the Churchill River. We are contemplating canoeing down this rapid. The water is turbulent. There are rocks, there are big waves, there are conflicting currents. The rapid is long and complicated.

There are those in the group that are looking at this. All they see is chaos. They see a disorganized jumble of water, waves, rocks and currents. They say, this is complete foolishness. Even contemplating putting a canoe into this mess is foolishness. Let's just do this portage and keep moving.

There are others in the group who have dabbled in white water paddling. They've taken a course and they know some of the basics. But they have rarely practiced their skill. And when they have practiced, they've stayed where it is completely safe. They've never tried more difficult moves, especially not something as difficult as Birch rapids. But here they are. They ask themselves: 'Should I pretend I know nothing and go along with those who say this is foolishness? Or should I go along with those who are confident and run this rapid?' I can sort of see the path through. Some of them try, but when they need to make a critical move, they don't completely commit themselves to making this move. Maybe they are unsure of their skill. Maybe they have not practiced enough to know what to do, maybe they hesitated just for a moment. Maybe they are distracted. And they end up swimming. These rapids have become a stumbling block to them.

There are also those in the group who have committed themselves to learning rapids. They have spend long days, even years to learning the skill. They have studied rapids and the movement of water. They have learned to focus on the moment. They put their canoes in the water and run this rapid. For those who understand, it is pure poetry to watch. To see these people in action is like watching wisdom at play.

We will come back to this analogy later.

Paul talks about foolishness, stumbling blocks and wisdom in the 1 Corinthians passage we read this morning.

To understand this 1 Corinthians passage, we need to understand the thinking at the time when Paul was writing. Paul says the message of Jesus' life and the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus was a stumbling block to the Jews. Why was that? The Jews believed, from a passage in Deuteronomy 21:23 that anyone hung on a tree is cursed by God. The fact that Jesus died on a cross is proof, according to the Jews at this time, that he was not the son of God. They could not imagine a suffering Messiah. The Jews also looked for a sign – a miraculous happening – like the crossing of the Red Sea or like the walls of Jericho falling. We see that in the John passage we read this morning where they said: “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”

In the year 45 a man named Theudas lead a group of thousands of Jews out to the Jordon River. He said at his command the waters would part and they would walk across on dry land. Of course the waters of the Jordan didn't part. Another man, in the year 54, took a group of 30,000 people to the Mount of Olives, a safe distance from the walls of Jerusalem. He said that at his command the walls would come tumbling down. And this did not happen either. Paul likely wrote these letters to the Corinthians between the years of 55 and 58. The Jews of that day were looking for a sign.

In our John passage the Jews asked Jesus for a miraculous sign proving he was the Messiah. Jesus did not give them that – other than rising from the dead three days after his death. For some, that was sign enough. For others, they refused to believe. So, for the Jew, the message of Jesus was a stumbling block that many could not get past.

For the Greeks, Paul says the message was foolishness. For the Greek thinkers of that day, the most important characteristic of God was that he is unaffected by humanity. God cannot feel. He cannot be influenced or be changed in any way by human joys or suffering. He is totally outside of, or beyond humanity. According to the Greek thinker, it would be an insult to God to suggest that he be involved in human affairs. The idea of the incarnation – God becoming human – would be unthinkable to the Greek philosopher of Paul's day. So, for the Greek, the idea of God identifying so completely with humanity that he would dye on a cross, is complete foolishness.

We live in a different world than Paul. There are, however, some surprising similarities. If we were to divide the world into two camps, like Paul did: those who call themselves followers of God – Christians if you like, and those who do not believe in a God. I realize this is rather simplistic – but bear with me.

Paul's first group, the Jews, is not unlike the religious people in our own society. There are many around us who would say they are Christian. There are many who maybe even attend church. But they pick and choose which part of the message of Jesus they would accept and which they would not. Their thought process may go something like this:

“To love my enemy? This enemy just tried to cheat me out of some of my money. I will not love that enemy.

To share my wealth with those who have less? I worked hard to get to where I am. I don't see them working hard.

Those beatitudes, they look nice on paper, but they make no practical sense. If I lived like that, others would walk all over me.

That really goes for the whole Sermon on the Mount. Maybe that worked in Jesus' day, but it certainly does not work now.”

These are people who are on the inside – like the Jews of Paul's day. To these people the message of Jesus is a stumbling block. Maybe the full extent of Jesus' teaching is for someone else – but it is not for them.

The other group Paul talked about – the Greeks – I'm comparing the Greeks of Paul's day to those in our society who do not believe in a god. A century ago, this would have been nearly unheard of in our western culture. Now, many assume that there not a god. Or if there is a god of some sort, this god does not concern itself with our affairs. The belief that God became human, lived among us, died on a cross and rose to life again is complete foolishness to most of those in today's culture.

Paul talks of a third group of people. These are the people who fully believe. They are completely committed by thought, word and action to Jesus' teaching and life style. To these people the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is wisdom.

I want to be in that third group. I want to be one who is so connected God, to Jesus. I want to be living that living this lifestyle that Jesus preached and demonstrated. Often this looks like pure wisdom to me. I want to be one of those people. Like that expert running those difficult rapids – this is wisdom at play.

But it is so difficult! I vacillate between being that person that sees the big waves and difficult currents and thinks I can't do this and that person that sees the clear path through and confidently paddles that path. I vacillate between seeing following Jesus as a stumbling block and seeing following Jesus as wisdom. I know intellectually that following Jesus is wisdom. But Jesus tells the rich young ruler to sell all he has and give it to the poor and then come and follow. Is he also telling me to do that? I need what I have for my retirement. I know the wisdom of what Jesus is asking. It is very difficult to have lots of stuff. What does Jesus say: "Where your treasure is, that is where your loyalty is." Is my relationship with Jesus where my treasure is? Or is my business more important? Or are my relationships more important? These are hard things. Of course, I would say my relationship with Jesus is most important. But is it really?

Its questions like these that make me wonder which category I fall into. Is my relationship with Jesus a stumbling block? Or is it wisdom? Or I wonder if I vacillate back and forth between these two. I expect that is the case. Some days imitating Jesus is pure wisdom. Many other days I am forever stumbling. I suspect most of us are in that state.

This has made me wonder about wisdom. How do I identify this wisdom that comes from a relationship with God? What does wisdom look like?

I think back to my whitewater canoeing illustration. That paddler that makes running these rapids look like poetry or as I said earlier, pure wisdom; what is it that this person has that others do not have?

The one thing is obvious. Practice. The person who is a good whitewater paddler has spent an enormous amount of time practicing the skill. The maneuvers this canoeist has to make have become so second nature there seems to be no thought put into it – he just does it. This takes a large time commitment – really a change in lifestyle – to make this happen.

The same can be said for living the Godly wisdom Paul is talking about. The person who shows Godly wisdom has spent years of practicing. About 45 years ago I read a book that talked about a man named Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence's goal was to always, every minute of every day, remember God. In his work (he was a dishwasher) he wanted to always be conscious of God. In his conversations he wanted to always remember that God was also there silently being a part of these conversations. Brother Lawrence said it takes a lifetime of practice to do this. Everyday there are many moments of failure. But that would never stop him from continuing to practice. For 45 years now that has been my goal – to keep practising. This is my commitment. This has often caused me to change my life style. And I keep practicing to always remember God in every moment of every day. Not remembering God becomes a stumbling block.

There is a second thing a whitewater paddler needs to gain this whitewater wisdom. This second thing is focus. There are so many distractions. If any one of these distractions becomes the focus, even for just a moment, a swim is likely about to happen. A whitewater paddler studies a set of rapids. A route or a path can be seen, and manoeuvres are planned to be able to follow that route through to the end of rapids. All along the way along side the path through the rapids are distractions. There are huge waves; there are rocks; there may be trees fallen in the water. And there are other distractions like those people that are watching and what are we having for dinner and look at the pelican fishing in that eddy along the shore. There are many paddlers who have spent years practicing, but because they lose their focus on the path– even for a moment – they never gain this whitewater wisdom.

There are so many distractions in our lives. These distractions take our focus off this wisdom Paul takes about. I suspect each of us has a similar list of distractions: money, jobs, relationships, health, and this list goes on. I am not saying these things are not important. But I am saying these things are of secondary importance compared to our primary relationship – that is God. This is where my first point fits in with this point. If these distractions take us away from remembering God in all things, then we lose our focus. These distractions need to either be cleared away or put into perspective. If God is the focus of our concern about money or our thinking about our job or our relationships, etc. then we have not lost our focus. Distractions without the god focus become stumbling blocks.

And there is a third thing a whitewater paddler needs to gain this whitewater wisdom. The paddler needs to become one with the river. Being a wisdom whitewater paddler does not mean that they overpower the river. No one can do that! It means learning how to use the river, its currents, its waves, its moods. The paddler is so tuned to the river that the movement of the water, the currents are used to move the canoe to where it needs to be. It is not overpowering the river. It is using the power of the river to move the canoe. Through practice and through focus the paddler and the river seem to develop a relationship. They become one. When all these things come together it is beautiful to watch. It is pure whitewater wisdom.

In our 1 Corinthians passage Paul talks about this. Godly wisdom grows out of relationship. No matter how much we practice, no matter how much we focus, Godly wisdom does not happen without relationship. Just like our paddler needs to become one with the river, we need to become one with God for wisdom to happen. God's thoughts become our thoughts. God's priorities become our priorities. Becoming one with God takes practice and it takes focus. It takes putting distractions in their place. And God has promised us his spirit to give us the patience and the focus to make this happen. This Godly wisdom does not just happen. Both us and God are involved to make it happen.

I suspect because I am human, I will always vacillate between experiencing wisdom and experiencing stumbling blocks. My prayer is that as I continue to practice, as I keep distractions in their proper place and as I continually become more one with God, I will experience fewer times of stumbling blocks and far more time living in God's wisdom.