

**THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR MAKING CHRISTIANS LIES SQUARELY ON THE
SHOULDERS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**
Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Epiphany 2026
1 Corinthians 1:18–31

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Reading from before, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31:

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

**“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I shall thwart.”**

²⁰ 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? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ 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; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

One of the privileges we have as Christians is telling others we meet about Jesus, and “*the hope of glory*” (Col. 1:27) we have in Him.

When telling others about Jesus, our goal is *always to lead them to the cross*, so that they, too, may repent of their sins and believe the Good News of salvation that comes through Christ.

But it is not always easy, is it? Often, we are a little timid about telling others about Jesus. We would rather remain quiet and “not rock the boat” with others, especially those we meet in our daily lives who, from their words and actions, show they care little about religion. They become quite stirred and defensive if the name Jesus comes up in conversation.

However, not everyone is like that. There are those who, when the opportunity arises, and you mention Jesus to them, will listen and appear to be receptive to your words. They are like the men to whom the Apostle Paul addressed at Mars Hill in Acts 17. They listened to what he had to say about the God of creation, who sent His Son, Jesus, and responded, “*We shall hear you again about this*” (Acts 17:32). In a polite way, they put an end to Paul’s address by vaguely suggesting that perhaps he could finish at another time. Whether that other time came, we aren’t told, but so often, when we talk about Jesus to others, and the discussion can continue at a later time, that other time never comes.

So, it is. While we may have polite conversations with others, in the end, it often feels as if we have achieved nothing, and we begin to think, “*What is the point?*” We know we are commanded to tell others about Jesus, but when we see that our evangelising isn’t achieving anything, it is so much easier to keep our mouths shut. But then we feel guilty because *we know we ought to tell others about Jesus, especially when the opportunity arises.*

If you feel that way, the Apostle Paul has some good news for you, and he mentions the Jews and the Greeks to make his point. He says, “¹⁸ **For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.** ¹⁹ **For it is written,**

**“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I shall thwart.”**

²⁰ **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?** ²¹ **For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.** ²² **For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,** ²³ **but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.”**

How can this be good news?

By nature, people expect something else from God than the simple offer He makes, namely, “**the word of the cross,**” which is nothing more than pointing them to Christ crucified. The Jews were such people. Paul wrote how the “**Jews demand signs.**” “*Show us a sign,*” they demanded of Jesus, “*then we’ll believe You are the promised Messiah.*”

Jesus *did* give them signs. He healed the sick; He opened the eyes of the blind; He raised the dead; He preached the gospel to the poor. But they wanted a different kind of sign, because *they wanted Him to be a different kind of Messiah*—the liberator of their nation from the hated Romans, rather than the Saviour from sin.

The Jews were also familiar with miracles in their history: the crossing of the Red Sea, the destruction of the walls of Jericho, and the destruction of Sennacherib’s army.

Then there were the Greeks. The Greeks’ religious history did not feature miracles. Rather, Paul said how they “**seek wisdom.**” They wanted a religion that challenged their intelligence. They wanted philosophy, not a story about a crucified Jew who made great claims about saving the world. Such people scorned the gospel of a crucified Christ. Christ was a “**folly to Gentiles**” —to the Greeks and other unbelievers. They laughed at the idea that God revealed that His Son became a human being. They ridiculed the thought that “**the word of the cross**” could make people better. They considered the claim that Jesus was the only true God and Saviour a piece of foolishness. In their opinion, religion should be something scholarly and learned, something to reason out.

Returning to the Jews, this same gospel was also “**a stumbling block.**” They were scandalised by a religion that declared that a man executed as a criminal was their God. They were insulted when they were told that they, God’s chosen people, were guilty of crucifying the Son of God. Even today, very few Jews get over this stumbling block.

The point is that Paul teaches how people respond in different ways when they are told about Jesus, and not all responses are positive. Actually, when Jesus says in Luke 12:29, “*Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom,*” we get the impression that there will only ever be a small number of disciples in the midst of the great mass of nations in the world.

But how can this be good news for us? Isn’t it bad news when we speak up for Christ and get no or very little response? Doesn’t this mean we have failed in our duty in pointing others to Christ and making them Christians? Well, no, it is good news because the Scriptures place the responsibility for making Christians not on us, but *squarely on the shoulders of the Holy Spirit.*

A little later in this same Letter to the Corinthians, the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write, “*However, an unspiritual person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. For they are foolishness to him; and he cannot know them because they are discerned spiritually*” (1 Corinthians 2:14). Apart from the Holy Spirit, people are spiritually blind and dead. We can certainly plant the seed—we are called to do that—but the growth happens ***only by the Holy Spirit’s power through the Word proclaimed***. Paul writes how “**It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.**” These words teach us that it is God who saves. Our Lutheran Confessions rightly state, “*It is God’s will that His Word should be heard and that a person’s ears should not be closed (Psalm 95:8). With this Word the Holy Spirit is present and opens hearts, so that people (like Lydia in Acts 16:14) pay attention to it and are converted only through the Holy Spirit’s grace and power, who alone does the work of converting a person.*”¹

It was the Holy Spirit who led the Corinthian Christians to understand that they had been saved through “**the word of the cross.**” Had the learned Jewish scribes or the Greek debaters discovered that? No! All these brilliant people had proved to be were fools, for with all their wisdom they rejected the only way of salvation there is: Jesus of Nazareth, dying on the cross for our sins. All God had to do to show how foolish they were was to reveal His grace in His Son, Jesus Christ, and then wait for their knee-jerk reaction. They would automatically reject God’s grace in Christ.

It wasn’t just by chance that the worldly-wise rejected Christ, despite all they knew about so many things. God, in His wisdom, saw to it that the world would never find God through human brilliance. God’s way had nothing to do with human wisdom. He was pleased “**through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.**” *How much clearer could it be?*

Through “**the word of the cross**” is the way God has obtained His victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil. Salvation comes through the cross of Christ. The Son of God took on full humanity in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. He humbled Himself under the Law and fulfilled it for us.² Then He passively endured the punishment we deserved as He allowed mere men to nail Him to a cross. After He had suffered the full punishment for our sin, He died, and His friends laid Him in a tomb.

This is the Christ crucified that Paul preached to the Corinthians. This is the Christ crucified that faithful pastors still preach today. All the religious power and wisdom of God are delivered *via the preaching of Christ crucified, a stumbling block and foolishness to unbelief*. Through this Word of Christ comes victory and life!

Jesus Christ did not remain in the grave after He had paid for all our sins. Instead, He rose. He taught His disciples for forty days after His resurrection. Sometime during those forty days, Jesus appeared to His disciples and said to them, “*This is what Scripture has said: ‘The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day; and on the basis of His name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem’*” (Luke 25:46-47). This proclamation of repentance and the forgiveness of sins is “**the foolishness of God (that) is wiser than men, and the weakness of God that is stronger than men.**”

When we confess this message to others, we do not have to worry about how eloquent we speak or how persuasive we are. In fact, Paul says, “**not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.**” You don’t have to be anyone special. No human being is eloquent or persuasive enough to bring a single person into the family of God. The Holy Spirit does that. By all means, tell the people whom you meet about this Man who is Christ crucified, and invite them into the Lord’s house, but let the Holy Spirit worry about making them into Christians through His means, namely, *Word and Sacrament*. Jesus once said, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*” (Matthew 28:19-20).

¹ Epitome of the Formula of Concord, II 5

² Matthew 5:17-20

We do this when we confess our faith to the people we meet in our lives and invite them into the Lord's house to worship with us, where we, like the early Christians in Acts 2, devote ourselves "*to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*" In other words, we gather around Word and Sacrament.

We have the Word of God. We have the Holy Sacraments. Through these, as through means, we have the Holy Spirit. We have the promise of God that the means of grace will bear fruit, sometimes in a greater harvest, sometimes less, *as God wills*. Let these things suffice—the things of God—to fulfil the mission of making disciples. For above all else we have a risen, glorified, ascended, ruling, and soon-to-return Lord Jesus Christ, whose words of promise ring down the ages in good times and in bad: "*I shall build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it*" (Matthew 16:18). We can tell the people whom we meet about Jesus, but the mission is fulfilled because of God's promise, not our own efforts. His promise is sure, "*For, as the rain and the snow come down from the sky and do not go back there without watering the earth and causing it to bring forth and to sprout, so that it gives seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so My Word will be, which goes out of My mouth. It will not return to Me without results, but it will accomplish what I desire and be successful in what I have sent it to do*" (Isaiah 55:10-11).

May God continue "**through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe**" that through it, the Holy Spirit may move more and more to repent and be saved. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.