

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth. Open our eyes that we may see your kingdom. Open our hearts and minds that we might know the cry of our brothers and sisters who are hurting, hungry, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

We are now into the third week of our series for the season after the Epiphany that we are calling “Somos del Señor, We belong to God”. Our text for this series is found in Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth. As we just read a moment ago, Paul is reminding the members of that church, and us, that we are called to a new way of life and a new way of being... a way that many folks consider to be foolish. And do we want our conduct as the people whom we are called to be branded as foolish?

When we typically think of a person’s calling, especially a calling of God, we tend to think of persons who are called into some type of ministry. As a person who sits on the Board of Ordained Ministry for the Holston Annual Conference representing those clergy who are not ordained, but who are licensed by the Bishop for ministry, a person’s call, how they respond to that call, and how we as the Annual Conference help candidates for ministry confirm that call and live into that call is at the forefront of my thoughts. Especially as I prepare to lead one of the teams that will interview candidates for provisional and associate membership in the Annual Conference when we meet at First United Methodist Church in Alcoa on Monday, February 10<sup>th</sup>. Each one of these individuals has

completed the educational requirements for the relationship that they are seeking with the Annual Conference and they present themselves for us to determine if they have what it takes to serve fruitfully as clergy in the Wesleyan tradition. Let me emphasize the Wesleyan tradition. There are times when we acknowledge an individual's calling by God but recognize that their calling has a better fit in another denomination, and we will encourage the individual to enter the process that best fits their gifts and graces. I want to also acknowledge that each one of the individuals that we will interview are taking the next step in their journey as they enter a three-year period of growth and challenge before they are interviewed again for full connection as Elders and Deacons in the United Methodist Church. I invite your prayers for the process and for all involved as we move forward.

We typically think of a person's calling as a calling to ordained ministry, but that is not always the case... and it isn't the case that Paul is speaking of as he writes this letter to the Corinthian church. As followers of Christ, we are all called in one way or another to use the gifts and graces that we have been given by God so that we can make a difference in this world... a difference that reflects the Kingdom of God that Jesus heralded and Paul preached. This kingdom of God is the antithesis of what the world would consider to be sane and competent. We willingly follow a teacher who was condemned to death in one of the cruelest methods of execution known and practiced at the time, death on a cross that was the emblem of suffering and shame.

But calling is so much more than those who are set aside by God to teach and to preach and to be the living representative of God to a congregation. Each of you has a calling that you have lived out in one way or another. The calling of

Christ to “follow me” is like that. You lived out your calling through your work and you witnessed to Christ by your actions in that work. When I look out in this congregation, I see people who were teachers, and doctors, and nurses, all of which are professions in which you are truly called to make a difference. Each of you used the special gifts and graces that God bestowed upon you to make a difference in the lives of others with whom you came in contact. Others of you have used the gifts and graces that you have been given to live your life as an example of God’s work within you. Through your guidance, through your friendship, through your integrity and through your example of humility.

Yet, the world calls this kind of integrity and humility “foolish.” The fools that we are called to be does not diminish us as people, but rather reminds us of the source of our strength and our wisdom. If we are able to move our egos out of the way and truly focus on the unity of the body and the centrality of the call, it just might be possible to be in mission together as the church of Jesus Christ.

Humility is a hard sell these days. In a time of tooting one’s own horn to excess, being told you’re nothing special doesn’t seem like an approach that will get us very far. We’re told to stroke egos, to build up the body, to make people feel significant and important. We aren’t to tell people they aren’t really all that smart, or all that strong, or going to amount to very much. Yet, that is Paul’s approach in our Epistle text this week.

We aren’t the center of this text. We’re the test case. This text is a distillation of Paul’s theology of the cross. It is not, however, a theology divorced from the realities of living in the world. Paul doesn’t present this argument as a way of avoiding talking about the issues confronting the church in Corinth; issues

of rightness and wrongness, of orthodoxy and heresy, of insiders and outsiders. No, Paul dives into the debate by reminding us *who* we are. And *whose* we are.

The word (*logos*) of the cross is foolishness, he writes. At least that is how it looks to the world. It is the ultimate vulnerability, the ultimate weakness. It is a surrender of all power, all directive ability, submission to the powers that be. It would be foolish, the world would argue, to base a faith, to base a way of living in the world on such an act, on such a surrender.

We see it differently, of course. We see ultimate power here; the power of sacrifice, the power of vulnerability. And, here's the thing, Paul says, it wasn't an accident. It wasn't trying to clean up from a plan gone wrong. God's intent from the very beginning was to destroy the wisdom of the wise and to thwart the discernment of the discerning. God set out to turn the normal way of thinking on its head. And so, we have foolishness. At the very core of things, we have foolishness.

What else would you call it? To win through surrender. To conquer enemies by loving them. To transform our world through humility. To lead by serving all. Foolishness. And we're just the ones to do it! That's Paul's point: we are the ones chosen to live this foolish life in the world around us. We weren't chosen because of our smarts, or our strength, or our status in society.

You can't help but take offense at that. We like to be chosen because we've got something special. We like to be the center of everyone's attention. We like to be the first one chosen for the games, the one everyone wants to sit next to during the exam. And you might be that. You might be the strongest one in your neighborhood. You might be the one everyone turns to for advice, for knowledge.

You might be the one everyone hopes their kids grow up to be. But none of that matters. Not when it comes to faith. Not when it comes to being a disciple of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

You have something more important than strength and wisdom and status. You have foolishness at the core of your identity. And even that isn't your own foolishness; it is his. Paul says, God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus. And this source reformats our understanding of what is wise and what makes for a good life, a full life.

The foolishness of Christ and the cross may be a source for derision in the world. But here's the thing. This foolishness in Christ, this following of Christ, this allowing Christ to make a difference in our life and then allowing Christ to lead us in his foolishness gives us the power and the strength to truly make a difference in this world – a difference which gives God all the glory. The good news is that, in our foolishness, God has chosen us. God has chosen us to turn the conventional wisdom on its head and lead by service to a new way of living... a new way of life. A life where we seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.