

Selected Sermons #15

The Festival Half of the Church Year by E. Schaller

I Corinthians 1:21-31 Quinquagesima

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was please through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”

In the name of our Lord and Savior, fellow redeemed—

The prophet Isaiah wrote, “In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.” (Isaiah 2:2) This is a prophecy foretelling the greatness, the exalted place which the Church will hold among all people in the last days of the world. It pictures the nations flowing toward the Church to find help and refuge. We are in the last days, and we ask, *“What is it that makes the Church great, lifting it high above all other hopes that people may think they might have?”*

There was a time when God’s Church was actually situated on a mountain – in Jerusalem, where the cross was raised high on Calvary to receive the Son of God. Jerusalem was situated high in the rugged hills of Judea; from it people went downhill in every direction; to it they came up. Isaiah explains why the Church attracts people who want to be saved, when he writes, “Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths. The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 2:3)

The Word of the Lord – the word concerning the Lord – is the gospel. Wherever the Church is, there is the gospel and it's preaching. We are not ashamed of it. We are to realize that we are, as it were, on the highest mountain peak in the world – here, where the gospel is preached. And we are not going to step down just because there are people who will turn away because they are not satisfied, wanting something else. The gospel is the *“hill from whence cometh our help”* – and we want again to assure ourselves this morning that we know why. Let us then, ask –

Why does only the preaching of the gospel save?

In answer, we give these reasons:

I. Because it begins where people leave off

II. Because it meets the needs of people simply

I. The gospel saves because, first of all, it begins where people leaves off. Thus the apostle writes, *“For since in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was please through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those*

whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

There is considerable opposition in the world to our preaching of the gospel. I do not say that there is opposition to preaching – not at all! There are millions of people who are glad to listen to preaching, as long as it is not the gospel which is preached – for though the gospel is given to save people, **people want to save themselves**; therefore they are always eager to listen to those who tell them how. They listen with wide eyes and open ears to the scientist who utters wise advice and makes hopeful predictions of an individual’s skill and ability to overcome the problems and weaknesses of human kind, so that they can finally raise themselves to perfection. Or a person might run to the astrologers and fortune-tellers, here they treat a person with signs and miracles. These are supposed to show the strange and wonderful powers which a person has at hand to use if he or she will only use them. As we have so often said, **many churches today no longer preach the real gospel anymore.** Their religion, too, is one of self-help, of what a person can do to save themselves from evil.

But it was quite plain two thousand years ago that humankind was spiritually bankrupt, and that there was nothing that they could do to get out of the corruption of

sin which holds them so fast. Humankind has not made one step forward in their spiritual development since then. It is ridiculous to talk about progress! There have been changes, yes, but people are **deeper in distress** than ever, because all of their inventions have been used against them; the miracles of the modern age have made war and brutality more numerous and prevalent than ever before. There have been changes, but they have been for the worse. **God sent his gospel to a world in collapse.**

God's gospel is still to the world what a bottle of blood from the blood-bank is to a mortally wounded soldier; in delirium, such a soldier may struggle against those who put the needle in their arm to feed the needed life-blood. **So also does the world object to the gospel of Jesus and the cross**, saying that it is foolishness, saying that people can easily find a better way to health. We know how insane such a claim is, **for people have left off progress.** People are slipping backward rapidly, and an individual has never in all this time with all the science and invention found God. Surely that would be the very first essential, the first requirement. No one can ever find health and peace without knowing the Creator and serving God.

Yet all that an individual ever found in all their search was the prince of this world, the devil in his various disguises, in the many gods that make themselves known. *The wisdom of God* is surrounded on all sides by the signs of divine wisdom in this world, but the world by its own wisdom did not even know God - the God that sent Christ and his gospel of peace. They may call it *foolishness* that God's Son came into this world from heaven and died under the tremendous curse that rested upon people, that he satisfied God's wrath by his sacrifice, and that he opened heaven. Yes, they may call it foolishness, but after what we have seen of ourselves, of our own hearts, and of the condition of the world, we know very well that *even the foolishness of God is wiser than people and their own kind of earthly wisdom.*

Where people end, there God begins.

II. Does this mean, perhaps, that the gospel is far too deep for people to grasp? May it not be that it expects too much, that people cannot use it because they cannot reach so high? Oh, no! The second reason, indeed, **why only the preaching of the gospel saves is that it meets the needs of people so simply.** *For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. But God chose the foolish things of the world*

to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”

There is a famous parable in the teachings of Jesus which tells of a young lad who sought to enjoy and taste life by leaving home and going into a far country. This was the prodigal son; being a child in the house of his father was too simple for him, too stale – so he left to search out the pleasures of the world. But the world was too much for him and robbed him blind. Where did he finally find the answer to his real needs? Back in the simple, humble kitchen of his father’s house, where there was bread and warmth and love.

People need help, that is certain – but they do not need complicated, hard-to-find help. Even the world is too deep for a person in their sinful condition, and they cannot grasp it. The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork, but even this revelation people cannot understand. People have dug

deep and flown high; they have discovered many mysteries of this universe and now have the use of atoms – yet the first thing they have learned to do with the atom is to blow everything and everyone up. Yes, the more that people learn of nature's secrets, the nearer they come to destroying everything in the universe.

It is time that the prodigal son gets back home! The way to hope and life does not lie in the mysteries of mathematics and in the heavy volumes of great thinkers. The Lord God yearns for people to have peace and happiness, and God does not look for deep things in a person. God has not made a selection of the great and the wise in this world for they usually are not the ones who heed his call, as we can plainly see, but the humble and the simple become the chosen ones.

For as the prodigal son's father held out to his miserable son the most humble things of life to comfort him – a loaf of bread, a set of clean clothes, and the simple adornment of a ring on his finger – so God holds out to us the gospel. Now, see how humble a thing it is! It holds up a rough and ugly cross of wood, a man who died on it, and the blood that was shed on it. He pictures here the entire, the whole, terrible fact of sin. People have fallen away from their God and must be forever banished to hell; they have earned eternal death and

pain. **But his penalty has been paid** in poverty, wretchedness, and on the Cross by God himself, so that whoever believes on him should not perish but have everlasting life.

These are the simple, humble, plain truths – and fortunately they reach to all people. Any drunkard who has been hauled before a judge and sentenced to thirty days in the workhouse can understand what God says in the gospel. He or she will hear that God has set them free, that their offenses are paid for, taken away, and pardoned. This person will hear that someone else served his or her sentence. This person is told, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.” (Romans 8:1) **It is simple to be saved in this fashion, simply because we are already saved.** The gospel is not a theory to be debated; the gospel is not a recipe – it is a fact preached, that is, announced – for preaching is not done to train people for a program of saving themselves but a message the Spirit uses to win poor, lost souls.

After the prodigal son returned, starving and afraid, after he had confessed his sin and asked for a job as a servant in his father’s house, the father made an

announcement, *“My son who was lost is found.”* That was all, but it was enough. It was a fact and remained a fact. The prodigal, whatever he had been, was **now a son again, and that ended the matter.** Even so the good God speaks to each and every one of us by the sacrifice of his Son on Calvary, telling us that we are back as children in our Father’s house, tells us to relax and be thankful and enjoy it, tells us to end our vain searching and striving, to leave our sins and close our eyes and be at peace. The gospel asks nothing of anyone save that they return to childhood, and like a child worn-out with empty and miserable wandering, accept Jesus to be their own wisdom and righteousness, sanctification and redemption.

People of God, we have a great obligation toward the church which preaches **this simple thing** to people and holds up the message of the Cross of Christ before the world. Let us not confuse simpleness with unimportance or underestimate the need or the labor. It is the labor of love that a father does gladly for the lost son, and a mother does for the wayward daughter. It is a labor which we begin among our own. It is the blessed labor of seeking the lost wherever they may be found. **It is God’s work that begins when everything else is taken away.** Nor does our Father in heaven ask more

of us than he has equipped us to do. It is a simple work of God to hold dear his gospel of our Savior; it is simple work for the heart that has found the Savior and will not leave anyone behind. It is simply continuing in God's Word, knowing that in the word of the gospel there is safety, comfort, and a wonderful future in heaven. May the God of all grace abide with us, as always, for Jesus' sake, Amen!

Father of heaven, whose love profound #242

My soul's best Friend, what joy and blessing #36

In the cross of Christ I glory #354