

The foolishness of God is wiser than men

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

A sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

A few years ago a major church event happened. The Diocese of Pittsburgh voted to leave the Episcopal Church. This was an important diocese and a major break in that church. It's best understood by a remark made by the head of the Episcopal Church at that time, Presiding Bishop Griswold. He wrote: "Our problem is that we have two religions within our church. One religion is based on experience, and the other religion based on the traditional message of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer."

There is no way that these two religions can be put together and reconciled, and they have been gradually tearing the worldwide Anglican communion apart.

A few examples of religion based on experience: In some Episcopal worship services they have included Hindus in Holy Communion not just as observers. At a recent triennial national convention, the delegates voted on a resolution which said that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation. They voted it down. There is a crisis, as Griswold pointed out, based on the problem that there are two religions within the Episcopal Church.

We, of course, have had the same problem among Lutherans. It used to be common that the godparents or sponsors at a baby's baptism would be Christians. But among ELCA Lutherans that is no longer important on a churchwide level. Several years ago in Lutheran churches in Minneapolis and Ann Arbor, there were Baptisms in which the baby's sponsors were Hindus. In neither case was this a scandal; it was just accepted as that's what you do.

In 1991 when the World Council of Churches, which meets every seven years, met in Canberra, Australia, the opening of that huge meeting was led by a Korean professor named Chung, graduate of Claremont and Union Seminary. Accompanied by Australian aborigines in pain and loincloths, she invoked ancestor spirits and indicated that the best "image of the Holy Spirit comes from the image of *Kwan In* ... [who] is venerated as Goddess of compassion and wisdom in East Asian women's popular religion."

The Eastern Orthodox Christians walked out. And Christians from the Third World complained that these were the pagan gods they had left, and here the World Council of Churches is invoking them.

This past summer at a class reunion at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, there was a luncheon. A recent graduate, a Native American, was invited to lead the assembled alumni in prayer. She did. She led them in prayer to the spirits of her native religion. This was accepted as what an enlightened Lutheran college does today.

We are in a state of crisis. It is more broadly described as the polarization between relativism on the one hand (everything is relative) and fundamentalism (there are some fundamentals, and we're going to hold to them no matter what) on the other hand. The thing about relativism is that since it is based on the fact that people have their own experiences, therefore they are all equal, and therefore we should be tolerant about everything.

The problem with fundamentalism is: Where do you get your fundamentals? Not all fundamentals stand up under scrutiny. One can be very reactionary or very old fashioned.

In philosophy the same thing is going on, only the terms are slightly different. In philosophy they call it the difference between nonfoundationalism and foundationalism, but they mean the same thing as relativism and fundamentalism. The common term for nonfoundationalism is "deconstruction." It means everything is relative and everything is up for grabs. In philosophy the best illustration of this viewpoint is to ask: "What is reality?" Reality is not the reality out there, but reality is like a mirror, and what you see in the mirror is yourself. Reality is really only what you think, and what you in your mind think you think.

We are told we have to be tolerant. Yet there is a certain kind of disquiet. How do we sort this out? What happens for most people is that they try to find a place somewhere in the middle, between relativism and fundamentalism. What we end doing is saying: "Whatever works for you." Like fish we don't see the water we're swimming in. We don't see the controlling idea of this age is relativism, the claim there is no absolute "truth," but only what one thinks is true depending on one's own experience.

And that's the trouble, because we end up saying: "Whatever works for you."

Yet we have the sense that we have to have order, something to hang onto over against this idea of finally it's what "works for you."

What then hits us is this little verse in 1 Thessalonians 1:5a, where Paul writes: "Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."

Who is this Paul? Is he some sort of fundamentalist? Some sort of nut? Not at all. What Paul is doing here is pointing to something that is a totally different way. Not somewhere between relativism and fundamentalism. Something that is entirely different, a *tertium quid*. What is entirely different is that message of God coming in Jesus Christ and dying and rising for you and me. We say this in short form by saying: "the cross alone."

What does that mean? It means that Jesus died and rose for you and me. C. S. Lewis wrote: Either Jesus was crazy or he was Lord of heaven and earth. There was no place in between. No place to say he was a good man, a healer and a teacher.

What this amounts is a double scandal. The first scandal is that God, who made everything, at a certain time and place became one of us and died. That's the scandal of particularity.

And then the second scandal, which is even more impossible, is that the Holy One of all took on sin and death and conquered it. That is summed up in that famous place in 1 Cor 1:22-25. We can put it in our terms:

"Jews seek miracles and Greeks seek philosophy, but we preach Christ crucified, a scandal (an offense) to the Jews and nonsense to the Greeks, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

It's totally different, a totally different answer, and it is also stated in a different way in 2 Cor 3:17, which reflects this little place in 1 Thessalonians 1:5a: "The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." Amen