

“Uncommon Sense”

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>

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January 30, 2011

A couple of years ago while we were living in Dallas, my brother and his wife came to visit us during a particularly chilly winter weekend (Chilly in comparison to the typical Dallas temperatures; which means it was hovering right around 32 degrees).

One evening we decided to go to a local barbecue establishment as the precipitation started turning to freezing rain. By the time we packed into the vehicle a nice thick layer of ice had formed on the windshield. So, while the car was warming up, my brother and I decided we'd start scraping the ice off the windows of the car.

My brother grabbed the only scraper we had and was laboring to break through the tough icy layer. So, feeling a little useless, I looked for something I could use to help him.

I looked around and saw hanging from our grill one of those big metal spatulas that look like a small shovel and are as long as a yard stick. I thought to myself, "That'll work."

So, I grabbed it and began scraping away; breaking off big chunks of ice, getting some great results and working much more efficiently than my brother's puny plastic scraper.

I was doing fine until my wife said, "Dave, please stop." "Why?" I said as I kept up my scraping. "Because, your scratching our windows, I can see it from inside." "Okay, whatever..." I thought as I put down the spatula and sat in the driver's seat.

And then I saw white scratches down all across the windshield, across the passenger window and the rear window. It looked like a cat had been holding on for dear life as it slid down the side of our car.

Now, I know you're probably thinking when I tell you this story, "DJ, bless your heart, how could you do something so boneheaded! It's common sense."

Common sense is the term we use to refer to a general understanding of what is right, moral or true. It's common sense to avoid lofty places during thunderstorm. It's common sense to wear boots in deep snow. It's common sense to avoid touching the sizzling skillet they bring to your table at a restaurant. It's common sense to refrain from eating Twinkies and drinking Mountain Dew when you're trying to lose weight. It's common sense to use plastic scrapers on your icy windshield.

And yet people - smart people, good looking people, normal people – still seem to ignore or fail to follow good common sense. And when someone defies what everyone else believes to be true and smart, we have a word for this; we call it "foolish." Which is precisely how Paul describes the message of the cross...

He writes, "For the message about the cross is foolishness." It's boneheaded, illogical, or - as popular atheist and philosopher Richard Dawkins puts it – an idea that's unworthy of respect and grandeur. The idea that Jesus came down to die on the cross is, in his mind, "parochial," a limited idea that primitive people dreamed up. It's all foolishness.

Paul admits: it is foolish to believe in the message of the cross. Dawkins is right. The thought that God would come here to earth to die an awful death on a Roman cross so that people could have eternal life is hard to embrace with our rational minds. Paul has no problem confessing this, and he writes this to the Corinthian Christians: "the message of the cross is foolishness."

Author Philip Yancey wrote about a news report he read back in 1993 about a messiah sighting among a sect of Lubavitcher Hasidic Jews in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn. At the time there were more than twenty thousand Hasidic Jews living in this part of New York City and many believed the long awaited Messiah was living in their community.

And so one day, hundreds of Hasidic Jewish men, with their black coats and curly sideburns dashed down the sidewalk toward the local synagogue where the long-awaited messiah would make his appearance. They packed into the meeting area, chattering excitedly as if they were at a championship sporting event.

The curtain pulled back and out stepped Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. He was ninety years-old, frail and unable to talk because of a stroke he had suffered the previous year. He waved slightly, moved his eyebrows and tilted his head. The onlookers cheered and shouted in unison, "Long live our master, our teacher, rabbi king forever!" Over and over they sang and shouted this phrase until the tired, brittle rabbi made a little gesture with his hand and went back behind the curtain.

Yancey says that when he read the article, he nearly laughed out loud. What foolishness! How could they possibly put their hopes and faith on a frail old man? And yet, he thought, he realized that he was reacting to Rabbi Schneerson the same way that people had reacted to Jesus.

How could a carpenter's son, a simple man from Nazareth who had no political connections and no apparent aspirations for power, be the long-awaited Messiah? And furthermore, this Jesus died! He didn't just die; he was crucified! He was tried as a criminal, tortured and hung shamelessly on a Roman cross!

How in the world could such a man be the Messiah? And this is what we are supposed to put our faith in? We're supposed to believe that the death of Jesus and his subsequent resurrection is what saves us? Really!? It's foolishness!... to those who are perishing.

That word, "perishing;" it's an interesting word we don't use too often in our daily lives. When we visit someone on their death bed, we don't say that our friend is "perishing." Or we don't look at our African Violet that hasn't been watered in a couple weeks and say, "Oh look my violet is perishing." It's an old word... it's a heavy word.

Perishing, to Paul meant a death that's permanent; a sleep that goes on forever. And Paul says that those who are "perishing" are those who are in the process of falling to sleep forever. They are disappearing into oblivion... fading away... into... nothingness.

Now we're all living and dying. Each one of us is getting a little closer to the day we will all die. Every minute, every second, every breath, every hour, every moment tugs us closer to the time of death. But some believe in a life that begins and ends – nothing else. We are born, we live, we survive, we die, and our body is returned to the elements of the earth.

But there are others - and I pray that this is you - who view life differently. They believe they are born and they are born again. They live, and then they experience new life. They survive and they serve. They die and they are resurrected. This is more than a simple outlook or philosophy. It's a life that centers on the scandalous cross of Christ, which many have a difficult time accepting and understanding.

It's something so amazing and offensive that certain Jews stumbled over it like the cross was a crazy cousin you wanted to ignore at a family gathering. It is utter foolishness, so silly that it is dismissed or cast off as something nonsensical.

"I know," Paul says, "that there are debaters, scholars and wise people telling you otherwise." But this "uncommon sense," is wiser than the other competing theories and our weak faith is stronger than anything our six pound minds can conceive.

I like how Dr. Seuss said it, "I like nonsense, it wakes up the brain cells. It's a necessary ingredient in living, It's a way of looking at life through the wrong end of a telescope... and that enables you to laugh at life's realities."

But according to Paul this nonsense and foolishness is more than just a way to get you to laugh. According to Paul, it's your source of life which in turn gives you new life.

For those who have worked in the auto industry (especially GM), you'll know what I'm talking about when I say the word, NUMMI.

In the mid 80's, GM was facing the beginning of the end. They were declining in popularity and losing market share in the U.S. Something had to be done. So, they made an unprecedented agreement with Toyota who wanted to sell more cars in the U.S. but was up against tighter import restrictions established by Congress.

So, as a peace offering, Toyota agreed to share the "The Toyota Way" of making cars with GM and the place they would try this experiment was at an automobile plant in Fremont, CA called New United Motor Manufacturing Incorporation: NUMMI.

“The Toyota Way” was unique to American workers because it was all about teamwork, efficiency, relentless improvement and consistent quality. But, sadly, while “The Toyota Way” had great results at NUMMI, it wasn’t warmly accepted elsewhere at GM. Why? Some flaws in the system were discovered, yes, but mostly it didn’t catch on because it went against the common wisdom held by the American way of making cars.

Many speculate, and some of you can attest to this, if GM would have listened to the “foolishness” of The Toyota Way, GM could have survived and maybe even thrived.

When you and I say that we follow Christ, we aren’t just checking a box on a census form. We aren’t just picking a favorite sports team or dropping a name on our resume. When you and I say that we believe in the message of the cross we are declaring that we believe Jesus is the source of our life and that his presence in our lives compels us to live differently. It may not be very popular, cool or comprehensible and it may even be called, as Paul suggests, “weak,” “low,” or “bad.”

I sat down to write this sermon this past week at the Two Brothers Café in downtown Brighton and I struck up a conversation with the owner who told me about some of the partnerships he has with some of the local businesses in the area.

I asked him how things were going and he told me, “Eh, I’m just eeking by. You just can’t make a real significant profit right now. I guess I just picked a bad time to open a business.”

And I guess common business sense would say that he should wait until there’s more stability, until the numbers indicate that all is well, and that a profit is certain. But is that really what life is about, relying only on the common sense and popular wisdom of the day?

I thought about that and so I said to Tim, the owner of Two Brothers Café, “How about we not say that it’s a bad time to open a business but a bold time to open a business?”

Now, there’s a thin line between being bold and being foolish isn’t there. There’s a narrow margin between insanity and sanity, just like it’s tough to tell the difference between being odd and being unique.

There’s an old hymn that was written by Frederick Lehman back in 1917. It’s called “The Love of God,” and the lyrics are based on an old Jewish poem. The first verse goes like this:

*The love of God is greater far
Than tongue or pen can ever tell;
It goes beyond the highest star,
And reaches to the lowest hell;
The guilty pair, bowed down with care,
God gave His Son to win;
His erring child He reconciled,
And pardoned from his sin.*

But the third verse is the interesting part of the song. That verse wasn’t written by Frederick Lehman. It was found scrawled on the cell wall of an insane asylum that was occupied by a Jewish Rabbi. It reads this way:

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above,
Would drain the ocean dry.
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.¹*

¹O love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure
The saints’ and angels’ song.

Now, those words could have been written by a sane man, but they just as easily could have been written by someone crazy... crazy with love about the crazy love of God that is symbolized by the scandalous message of the cross. And it's this love that puts all other wisdom to shame.

That's why I don't know if I have to convince anyone with a "Case for Christ" or a "Case for a Creator" or a "Case for Faith." I don't want to feel pressure to have my arguments in line for why my faith is a reasonable faith. I just have to be bold enough to talk about the love of Christ shown on the cross and boast about the change that it makes in me. I will not boast in my own human wisdom, I will instead, as Paul says, "boast in the Lord."

If you ever have the opportunity to celebrate Easter in France, you'll notice a phrase written everywhere and spoken after each mass and church service: "L'amour de Dieu est folle!" "L'amour de Dieu est folle!" "L'AMOUR DE DIEU EST FOLLIE!" The love of God is folly!

Let us not be ashamed of saying it! Let us believe in it boldly! Let us hold to this "uncommon sense." The love of God is folly! The Amazing Grace of God is so wonderfully foolish!

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS

For Sunday, January 30, 2011's Sermon

Foundational Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Featured Scripture Reflection: "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (NRSV)

Opening Icebreaker: What are some things you wonder about which may never have an answer (Examples: I wonder if there is life on other planets. Did Adam have a belly button? What is heaven like?)

Scripture Questions

What is the scripture saying?

- Why is Paul writing these words specifically to the Christian church?
- When Paul writes about "foolishness," what does he mean?
- Paul writes about God choosing the weak in this world so that the strong are shamed (v. 27), who or what are the "weak" and who or what are the "strong"?
- What does Paul mean when he refers to the crucified Christ as being a "stumbling block" (v. 23)?

How is your life touched?

- When you consider your faith, what are some things you believe that seem like foolishness to others?
- What does the cross mean to you? How does the message of the cross come into conflict with some generally accepted principles in our culture today?
- What is the world's definition of strength and wisdom? How does it differ from what Christians believe?
- In what ways do you fall short of the human standards of strength and wisdom (v. 26)?

What is God's invitation to you?

- How can the mysteries of your faith bring you joy and comfort rather than fear and anxiety?

What can you pray for?

Pray that God will strengthen your faith as you step out boldly to believe impossible and seemingly ridiculous things.