

***A Stumbling Block to All***

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

I will be brief today, I promise. First we had that congregational prayer for the first time for a long time, so that took up a little bit of time, which is great — we want to give time to prayer. Then all those announcements took up some time, and so here's what I'm hoping to do. I'm going to use just one of the lectionary texts for today and even though we're in a topical series, "Beloved Community," which is our theme for the year at Artisan, we're going to be using the lectionary texts to go through. And I'm only going to use one of them today, which means I'm going to forego the chance to preach on one of my favorite verses in the whole Bible; John three seventeen. And it means I'm going to forego the chance to preach about fiery serpents in the wilderness and how the people were saved by a bronze serpent on a pole. And I'm going to stick to just the one passage from First Corinthians, and from that passage I'm going to do something which I hope will be very simple. I'm going to read it to you and give you three things. I'm going to give you one choice to make, I'm going to give you one pitfall to avoid, and I'm going to give you one rule to live by. This is called setting the table. We're going to read the text so I can give you one choice to make, one pitfall to avoid, and one rule to live by.

So, this is first Corinthians chapter one. And if you'd like to follow along in the red Bibles you can turn to page nine twenty six. If you brought your own Bible presumably that means you can find First Corinthians chapter one, but if you need help there's a table of contents. The lectionary assigns us First Corinthians one eighteen through twenty five. Here's the passage:

"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. For it is written (and here he's quoting from the prophet Isaiah), I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. 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? For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided through the foolishness of our proclamation to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim

## 2018-09-16 A Stumbling Block to All

Christ crucified; a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

And I did read one extra verse there but that's okay, I won't charge you. So let's just go back to the passage a bit and I'm going to give you those three ideas. Verse eighteen: "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." The first thing I want to give you is one choice to make, and here's the choice that each one of you needs to make. Will you be among those who are perishing or among those who are being saved? There are all kinds of other ways that we could divide ourselves into groups, one group on this side, one group on the other side. I could ask you to shout them out and you would probably get to a dozen before I could even tell you, okay, that's enough. Because this is what society does. This is what we do in society. We organize ourselves into groups so that we can oppose other groups so that we know when we're in and we know who's out — political, racial, economic, sports teams, you know? It goes real deep. But as we'll see, all of those divisions are artificial. They're all human made. And they are all false dichotomies. But this distinction, this dichotomy, this one is real. Some of us are perishing, others of us are being saved. This is a fundamental Christian truth. In fact, the earliest Christian teaching that we have is called the *Didache*. Post-Biblical, but very early on it's a teaching for Disciples of Christ and it starts with these words: "There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways." So that's a choice you get to make. In fact, that's the choice that you must make and as always with the mandatory choices, not choosing is a choice.

But let me be somewhat reassuring to some of you and somewhat discomfoting to others of you. I want you to notice the tense of the verbs. You know I'm a humanities dork, right? What does it say: To "those who are perishing" and to "those who are being saved." Do you notice that this is a not only a present tense thing? In other words, not to "those who are already dead," not to "those who are already saved," not to "those who will die" or "will be saved," but to "those who are perishing," and to "those who are being saved." Not only present tense but it's an ongoing present tense. So this line that I'm drawing in the sand is not intended to be a terror to half of you and a comfort to the other half. It's intended to make you realize that whether you want it to be true or not, your life is in process and is going in a direction. And the choice that you get to make is which direction your life is going. I hope that you're reassured by the fact that you don't have to get there right away. I also hope that you're somewhat unsettled by the fact that maybe you didn't get there right away when you thought you did. But the message of the cross, the apostle Paul says in the very first sentence of this passage today: "It will be received by you either as foolishness or as power," depending on which process you're in. By the way, the same thing is true about God's love. You'll either experience it as a warm

## **2018-09-16 A Stumbling Block to All**

blessing or as white hot wrath depending on your posture toward God. So that's the choice you have to make — are you going to be among those who are perishing or among those who are being saved.

So let's move on from the choice. I want to talk about the pitfall to avoid. This is verses nineteen through twenty one. And remember, he's quoting the prophet Isaiah for part of this for Paul says, "For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." He goes on to say, "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? For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided through the foolishness of our proclamation to save those who believe." So here's the pitfall to avoid. It's the temptation to give up on understanding the world. Avoid the pitfall of being tempted to give up on understanding the world. See, even just the way the language kind of dances around there, and translating Paul from Greek to English is sometimes a Herculean task, it's very hard to parse his syntax sometimes. But with the language and also with the content of it, it would be possible to read this couple of verses about how God has made the wisdom of the world foolish and then take that to mean that we can never really understand how the world works so we shouldn't bother trying. Or worse, to take it to mean that very smart people, scientists, philosophers, academics — that they're all just fooling themselves and we shouldn't follow them because they're wrong because they think deeply about the world. Have you ever encountered any kind of talk like this? If you're in the sciences you probably have. This is a disease called anti-intellectualism and unfortunately it's running rampant in certain pockets of the Christian Church today.

So I want you to avoid the pitfall of reading verse twenty and then retreating into a simplistic understanding of the world based on a simplistic understanding of Scripture, because that leads to a simplistic faith. And the problem with simplistic faith (notice I'm not saying childlike faith because that's commended by Jesus), I'm saying in adult faith, that's simplistic. The problem with that kind of faith is that it does not stand up very well to any kind of attack. It's like a house of cards, and just one thing gets pulled out and the whole thing goes flat. Maybe nobody has been pulling the cards out of your house yet (congratulations, that's very pleasant) but they will start. And if you have built up a simplistic understanding of faith based on a simplistic understanding of Scripture because of a text like this, which maybe on the surface of it seems to say don't bother trying to thin too deeply about things, then when then happens is your house will collapse. And I could say a lot more about this, but I've already promised to be brief so I'll limit myself to this one last piece. I have found in my own life that the more deeply I think about faith, the more real and significant it becomes to my life. You may worry that if you start

## **2018-09-16 A Stumbling Block to All**

to engage in that kind of thing that you're going to go down this slippery slope into whatever-ism. But I haven't found that to be the case for me.

All right, so I gave you a choice to make, I gave you a pitfall to avoid. Let's move on and get that rule to live by and then we'll sing some more and have communion and go to the Belonging Fair. Verses twenty two through twenty four: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews, foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." So here's the rule to live by: Float above the lines. What on earth does that mean, float above the lines? Here is what I mean — the world wants us to categorize ourselves along the line that's like a spectrum. Have you ever heard the "spectrum talk": Where are you on the spectrum between X and Y? Are you a liberal or a conservative? Are you a thinker or a feeler? Are you a spiritual person or an empirical person? By the way, "empirical" is the word I was looking for in the "Stump the Pastor" thing when I was casting about for that. Are you a spiritual person or an empirical person? That last one actually I think is what Paul is getting at with this "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom" business. On the face of that, how many of you when I read that were like, "Oh, that's kind of racist"? It sounds like an ethnic stereotyping, right? Jews want this, Greeks want that. But think of it like this, some people want to see miracles to reinforce their faith and some people want evidence to reinforce their faith. And now that communicates to us doesn't it? And what I mean by float above the lines is that we don't have to choose because they're false dichotomies anyway once we're presented with the cross. So rather than saying, "I'm on this end of the spectrum" or "I'm on this end of the spectrum," we could say, "You know what? I think of it as a much more three dimensional kind of thing. I try to stay above the lines." Don't say it like that because that comes off as very arrogant and high-minded, but you get what I'm saying? Reject those dichotomies and instead float above the lines.

Because here's the thing — I think what the passage is trying to say is that both types of people, both ends of the spectrum, are all going to be thwarted by the foolishness of the Gospel. We proclaim Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, and one of the many ways that the Gospel levels the playing field between groups of people is that it confuses our sense of how the world works and how things should be ordered. And so in one sense, we are all equally confused in Christ, to take heart. And we are all equally empowered and given wisdom in Christ. To those who are the called, Paul says, both Jews and Greeks, both science people and spiritual people, both thinking people and feeling people, etc. etc. etc. Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. So as we think about being a beloved community, the idea of loving our neighbors as ourselves, it would be best I think to extend empathy and caring to people who experience faith in a different way than we do. Empathy for

**2018-09-16 A Stumbling Block to All**

people who find faith to be a struggle. Empathy for those who want to see miracles, empathy for those who want to see evidence. Boy, I think empathy is probably the greatest casualty of our society in the last few years. But if we keep Christ and His cross at the center of our world, if we choose to be among those who are being saved, if we think deeply about our world and our faith, and if we reject the divisions between us and float above the lines then we may just begin to experience beloved community. And even better than that, we may just begin to offer a beloved community to those around us. May it be true for us, amen.

As the band comes and we sing another song or two I want to invite you to come and receive Holy Communion, this sacrament of Christ's grace which we offer on his behalf each week when we're together. You can come and receive a piece of bread, take it off the plate, dip it in one of the cups and eat it right there at the table. And remember Christ's body which is broken for you. Remember his blood which is shed for the forgiveness of sins. May it be the real presence of Jesus, food for your hungry souls and an act of unity with those around you.

[end of sermon]

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