

Call to Worship

We come before God with word and song, into a timeless region of thanks giving and praise.

We come to honor God without fretting, without attention to time, in refreshment for our spirits.

May we hear God speak to us in silence and sound.

May we hear God in stone, in space, in action, in word, in all that we see and hear and say, in what is known, and in what will be revealed.

Prayer of Consecration

Cleansing Spirit, move in our midst. Clear our hearts of the clutter that prevents us from receiving a full measure of your love. Guide our prayers and our singing, Renew us!

Let us enter worship together with prayer and praise! These things we pray in your holy name. Amen.

The Word

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, "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 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.

Living the Word

The Paradox - Every so often, we as Christians should take a look at who we are, from the perspectives of an outsider. If we did we would see how strange our faith looks to others. The major event in the history of our faith is the humiliating death of a poor Jewish man by the hands of an occupying power on an instrument of torture and death. The central Christian symbol is the ancient equivalent of a noose.

The gospel itself is a paradox: We can see God's power in the powerlessness of Christ. It seems foolish that Christ would die so we can live with more freedom. God, as the creator of all things, holds all the power, reveals who God truly is by becoming exposed and susceptible. That in itself seems like foolishness, but God is so wise for our sakes.

Paul writes to a community to help them believe in the unbelievable, made possible through Christ. Corinth was a city with a long reputation for both quick money and fast living. It was a city on a thin strip of land, overlooking two important sea ports, one on each shore. There was a great traffic flow of traders and travelers, unwilling to go the long way around to get to the other shore.

The church of Corinth was not made up of the powerful and rich of that day, but of the weak and poor. Even today, we are a mix of all kinds of people: rich and poor, foolish and wise, some with some power, others with none; but people willing to look through the foolishness of the Gospel for the wisdom of God. Those who view

the gospel as foolishness miss all that their Creator has to offer them; a Creator with the mind of God, full of wisdom and understanding that we cannot begin to match.

God wants a community willing to see through the current culture to one that is focused on being Christ to the world even when that isn't popular; a countercultural group of people to witness to a illogical gospel. You might think that an organization which goes against the culture may not survive. But as we realize that we can't just depend on ourselves, and know that we need the guidance and support of Christ in our lives, we become strong within our weaknesses.

The church can thrive, and has for 2000 years because it is all about being relational with God and with each other. If we separate ourselves from the power of God shown us through the weakness of Jesus' human life, we quickly forget where and how our strength comes. When we lose our pride and acknowledge our true power source, we become strong within our weaknesses.

The Cross – H. Richard Niebuhr, a twentieth-century theologian, preaches: “[Through] the cross...the new hypothesis [becomes]: We are being saved. We are coming through the disaster, but we will not be lost. The cross does not deny the reality of death. It reinforces it. It denies its finality.”

The old hypothesis was that death was the end of it all. With initial grieving we feel the loss as if it is the end. It brings the reality close that in the whole scheme of time, all of our lives are momentary, and fragile. When we witness natural disasters or tragedies that seem so unreal, the reality of death is very present and it is difficult to remember God offers us something beyond this life.

Aging in itself is hard, because the world wants us to live forever; self-preservation at all costs. Through competitive academics and sports our children may be learning that it is all about climbing over whomever to reach the top. This can lead to a life of climbing over others for the higher rung on the corporate ladder or more toys to show our worth.

The paradox in this is that life isn't 'the one with the most toys, wins.' Instead it may be the one with the least toys because they shared what they had with integrity and the understanding of team versus self, and we all win together.

Where does the cross fit into a mentality of 'kill or be killed?' There is a paradox for you, because Jesus didn't work that way. Instead he said 'I will be killed for your sake.' It can be hard to justify that in this world. We are taught to 'do whatever is needed to save yourself.' This false wisdom alienates us from enemies and friends alike as we build barriers to being hurt, cushions from feeling anything that might cause pain.

Via Facebook this week, I received a note from one of the youth I confirmed a few years ago, who is currently devastated by a boyfriend break-up. My first reaction was, to patronize her with some old wisdom of 'there will be others.' Then I remembered those feelings of insecurity and loneliness that comes with being shut out by someone you thought you would always be with. I remember asking the question to no one in particular: "Why does it have to hurt so much?"

God's wisdom in allowing us to hurt, reminds us of what Christ did for us. At those times we need to know that we aren't crying alone. Surely this sounds like foolishness, but our free will choice from God is to take chances on relationships, until we find a mutual love in another person.

If we build walls and alienate ourselves from all relationships in fear of pain, we have nothing. When we experience pain in a relationship, we know it has value for now and for the future, even if that means with someone else. "Better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all."

Where does the cross fit into what we see in the products and surgeries available to make us younger, and extend our lives. Don't misunderstand what I am saying here: We are to care for and preserve life, ours as well as others. But these bodies were not intended to live forever. Care of all creation means that we will be

wise: in what we eat, how we exercise and the amount of stress we expose ourselves to, but there will always be a limit to what we can do and how long we put off death.

Where does the cross fit in with non-Christians, if God created and loves us all? Will all non-Christians perish as Paul says it? I find this a problem if I want to judge others for their beliefs, but that is God's work, not mine. We don't know the final destination of others, but are called to live the way Christ has presented to each of us.

It is foolishness for us to decide for others when we can't keep from sinning ourselves. Jurgen Moltmann, known for his 'theology of hope' puts it, "We are not the judges of faith, but the servants of joy."

Death – Across the mainline churches – United Methodist included, we see a decline in membership. It makes us wonder if the church will survive. We could do so much more if we had more volunteers and more money. But if we listen for God's guidance and continue to build relationships here and beyond these walls, this church won't die.

It will in time have a death of some of its members, some of its programs and even the crumbling of the building as it is. But if we allow it to be transformed, into something we don't even recognize yet, it will not die. If we do God's work, God will hold us together in some form.

Though Paul divided the people of his day into the saved or the perishing, we are all being saved and perishing to different degrees. The new hypothesis, or way of thinking, he gives those people is that we can be saved from our sinful self. If the perishing is of our doing, the saving is of God's.

Death is not the end. God has offered us a way to be saved even from death through transformation of our being. When you die from this earth, you are not gone forever, but transformed through Christ. That is a huge paradox, as we can't know what the transformation will be like, but we have to trust that it is real. That sounds like some crazy foolishness, yet it is given to us through the wisdom of the cross.

Salvation – Paul speaks of us who are 'being saved,' a phrase that has come to our generation to be a tag line for 'are you bound for heaven or for hell?' I have heard it said that I need to 'get saved' to be 'in or I might find myself 'out.' With that in mind, the paradox of the word salvation is that it comes from the Hebrew root which lends itself to being made roomy or wide, providing space as in 'open.'

So after death, 'being saved' would indicate eternal life, but more importantly, it would indicate being given a broader, freer life here and now. That brings to mind the the words that United Methodists have used to describe how they seek to follow Jesus Christ: 'Open hearts, open minds, open doors – the people of the United Methodist Church' and it confirms to me that I am in the right place if we can live that out.

So we come back to the foolishness of the cross found in the cost of following Christ. Taking up the cross of Christ, can mean denying what society says is 'the way to life.' Taking up the cross of Christ can be a painful journey, but brings blessings and great hope for our future. Carrying the cross together, makes the burden of it all easier.

We are reminded by the cross that we are all in this together. We hurt with each other, we celebrate with each other and we have hope together. As a church, we have unity through Christ and we are all in this together: liberals, moderates and conservatives. Our community of faith is formed around what seems to be complete foolishness – an instrument of torture and death - that was used for the salvation of all.

John Wesley said "We may not all believe alike, but we can all love alike." Likewise, we can agree with Paul as he writes "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."