

HOLY CROSS DAY/RALLY DAY

September 13/14, 2008

“The Word of the Cross – Folly or Wisdom?”

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Not too long ago, on the History Channel, I saw the story of Robert Fulton again. You may remember the story. In the early 1800's a man by the name of Robert Fulton was hard at work on one of his inventions. It was a boat. There wasn't anything special about that. But what was special was that it was a boat that would be propelled not by sail or oar or pole or by anything else that characterized water travel in those days. No, it was a boat to be propelled by steam. When the word got out that Fulton was working on a steam-driven boat, a lot of people thought Fulton was crazy. In fact, his idea was thought to be quite foolish. His boat, which was really called the “Clermont”, was dubbed “Fulton's Folly”. Fulton was met with laughs, catcalls and charges of insanity everywhere he went until the day when the Clermont moved up the Hudson River powered by steam. And when it did that not just once but again and again, people began to see and understand the wisdom and the power behind what they once called “Fulton's Folly.” You see, what was seen by many to be folly was, in the end, wisdom. Now the story of Robert Fulton and his steam-powered boat is hardly unique. History is full of such stories of both men and women who were laughed at as being foolish at first only to be considered wise in the end.

In a way, it's not unlike the story of St. Paul, the author of our text for this Holy Cross/Rally Day. After his life-changing experience on the road to Damascus – when he met Jesus face to face and was changed from a persecutor of Christianity into a preacher and proclaimer of Christianity – Paul was laughed at too. In Acts 17 for example, we read of what certain Greek philosophers said about his message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone – “What is this ignorant show-off trying to say?” they said. And on another occasion, as it's recorded in Acts 26, governor Festus shouted at him saying, “You are quite mad, Paul! Your great learning is driving you mad!” In the end it wasn't really Paul, it was the message He proclaimed that seemed to be foolishness to so many. To proclaim a man who died on a cross and who was raised again from the dead in three days to be the very Son of God and the Savior of the world seemed to be nothing but foolishness.

Paul was certainly aware that his message of Christ crucified seemed to be folly to many. He knew that by the world's standards Jesus seemed to be a loser. Winners don't die on a cross – losers do. Now if Jesus had done it differently – if he had established an earthly kingdom based on political power or military might – if he sat on a throne like a “real” king instead of hanging on a cross like a common criminal – if he had continued to live instead of being put to death – then he would be a winner, as least as the world measures such things. After all, that's what the Jews were looking for in a Messiah – one who would re-establish the kingdom of Israel as it was in David's time – one who would overthrow Roman rule and free the people – one who would usher in a new era of peace

and prosperity like the world had never seen before. The Greeks would have thought this a bit much perhaps, preferring a Son of God who would win over the world with his philosophy – giving lectures throughout the civilized world on how to be a winner.

But this, of course, is not what Jesus did and so, as Paul said, preaching Christ crucified was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. But, in the end, Paul said, this says more about man than it does about God. Man is, by nature, ignorant of God and His ways. And so man is the foolish one, not God – foolish about life, foolish about its meaning and purpose, foolish about its direction and fulfillment. Man's ignorance leads him to proclaim himself god and master of his own life and, in that, man sets himself up as the judge of what is wise and what is foolish. And in his foolishness, he considers God's Word and His will – especially as it's been made known in the person and work of Jesus and in His cross– to be utter folly.

Give me what I want, man says. Give me someone who can give me a full wallet and a full stomach. That's the kind of God I want. That's the kind of Savior I want. Give me physical health and security. Give me financial success. Give me the ability to do what I want when I want and in the way I want and I'll be happy. Give me a winner. Such is the thinking of those who, as Paul said, are perishing.

But to those who are being saved – to those whose very nature has been changed by the work of the Holy Spirit active in Word and Sacrament – to those who are no longer ignorant of God and His ways – to those who know Jesus as both the Son of God and the Savior of the world – the message of Christ crucified is not foolishness. It is, in fact, wisdom. It is not weakness, it is strength. To those who believe, Jesus is not a loser. He's a winner and, in that, He makes all those who believe and follow him winners too. For in the cross of Christ believers find a victory has been won – a victory over sin, death and the power of the devil – a victory not just for time but for all eternity – a victory that belongs to all who believe not because of their own wisdom and strength but because of God's wisdom and strength.

The world in which we live still considers the message of Christ crucified to be a stumbling block and just so much foolishness. But for us, for us who believe, for us who are being saved, it is still the very power of God.

On this Holy Cross Day we are reminded once again of the power that is in that cross of Christ. And on this Rally Day we are encouraged once again to draw on that power in the study and application of Christ's Word. The fact is that we all need more and more of that power in order to deal with a world that still considers Jesus Christ and his cross just so much foolishness.

May we be empowered to that end in Word and in Spirit once again today as we celebrate this Holy Cross Day, this Rally Day. In the name of Christ the crucified. Amen.