

Sermon: The Wisdom of The Cross**Scripture: I Corinthians 1:18-25; Matthew 5:1-12****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: February 1, 2026**

11 of us from our church are beginning to meet and make plans for our Service-Learning Trip to South Dakota to the Pine Ridge reservation that we'll do over the summer. I'm looking forward to it and the learning that will happen for us there and leading up to it. We'll also volunteer on the reservation but we also know that the benefit will be as much to us as it is to them.

As I begin reading a book by Ned Blackhawk called The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmaking of US History, I'm struck by how it frames the violence in Minneapolis and Maine and ICE aggression against immigrants. While many of us are horrified by what's going on, shocked as we watch the lawlessness of our own government and the violence perpetrated against citizens no less, we should remember that this isn't unfortunately a departure from the nature of who we are as a country but endemic to who we are. Our present is so entangled in a terribly violent past of genocidal practices by European colonizers against the people who were here first and so entangled with the violence of slavery against Africans that this is really another chapter of government-sponsored violence in our land not some aberration or distortion of who we are as a country. We are so uncomfortable with that truth that there's an aggressive campaign to white-wash our history again after we've just gotten real about it, to make a cleaner and more righteous picture of who we are, to reclaim once again the sinful Christian doctrine of manifest destiny, that God

especially blesses the United States of America. Blessed are we who are meant to rule the world!

But that is wrong. There is some good in who we are for sure but there is also bad, and of course, because we are a human collective of no more or less sinful people than people anywhere else. And especially as Christians, as Jesus followers and listeners to his wisdom, we are not afforded the illusion that we are somehow better than everyone else, which is what we receive from the wisdom of the cross.

That's how the Apostle Paul refers to it, that there is a wisdom of the cross, the wisdom of Christ crucified, that is not easy or popular wisdom but he says is foolishness to some and a stumbling block to others.

The wisdom of the cross. Wisdom in an instrument of torture and death. Is it that violence and aggression solves our problems? You'd think it might be, the way it's been used on flags and soldiers armor during the crusades and even today the Jerusalem cross has been seen on US marine garb but... it is exactly the opposite of that. The wisdom of the cross exposes violence not as just a necessity of what it means to be human but as sin, saying:

“You must now realize and confront the reality that violence against others, especially scapegoated others, to solve your problems is forever bankrupt, by the image of Christ the crucified savior.”

That's one thing that the wisdom of the cross says. I'm not saying we've listened to that wisdom or believed it or it's stopped us from a reliance on scapegoating violence but that it IS what the wisdom of the cross is about - highlighting that violence begets violence, and only love in the end wins. It's foolishness, I know, cause sometimes violence is simply

necessary right? But the wisdom of the cross leaves no room for it. So that's one thing the wisdom of the cross reveals to us.

The wisdom of the cross also says something else challenging and that is even though it was Roman centurions who actually crucified Jesus and Jewish religious authorities sanctioned it, the wisdom of the cross refuses to let us blame them and includes us in the sin. It's not Romans and Jews who killed Jesus (although we've certainly leaned into the blaming of the Jews over the ages), rather the wisdom of the cross implicates everyone. The wisdom of the cross says God came to us in love and we humans responded by executing God in our own pursuit of godhood, you might say, in our own fear and anxiety and wrath and greed. So run amok was human desire and violence so spiraling, that even God Godself came among and was killed by us and the perpetrators were simply human doing their human thing.

It's foolishness that we are suggested guilty for what they did to him 2000 years ago and yet there it is, the wisdom of the cross, a terrible thing to come to grips with, similar to coming to grips with our white privilege here in this country and admitting that much of it comes by way of the holocaust of native peoples and the economy of chattel slavery. The wisdom of the cross says that sin belongs to us all for we are all sinners and fall short of the glory of God.

I know that many of us here were kinda burnt by conservative protestant and catholic upbringings that emphasized our sinfulness and shame and only that and on us were laid heavy shame and guilt trips. And so we progressives tend to place our emphasis on grace and... rightly so, BUT we should be careful before jettisoning the wisdom of the cross that does say, as unpopular as it might be in self-help and new age circles, that

we are sinners and guilty. It's important because if we don't humbly acknowledge our weakness, we risk repeating the sins of our fathers and mothers, thinking ourselves better than them and exempt of the dark practices of pride, hatred, violence and greed that are dangerous to our souls and as present today as they ever were. The wisdom of the cross says we all hold the guilt of the human tendency to kill God in an effort to become gods ourselves, to eliminate love to get at what we believe we want, need, deserve. It's a stumbling block to many but that's the wisdom of the cross.

But also it's critical that we hear that that's not the end of the story nor is it where the wisdom of the cross ends. I think that's part of the damage done to us by our conservative churches and upbringings is that they failed to emphasize enough the second half of the wisdom of the cross that says that THOUGH we are all sinners THAT is not the end of the story. And so this is true too when it comes to the wisdom of the cross, that despite the fact that we did the worst to God and still do at times, God's loving willingness to forgive and forge a way with us is a fount of unending amazing grace. What was it that John Newton, the writer of Amazing Grace and former slave trader said before he died - "my memory is nearly gone but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great savior." We are saved by grace through the faith that says though I am a sinner, Christ is a forgiving savior. It's foolishness to say that God's grace has no end and forgives all, but that too, praise God, is the wisdom of the cross.

And so everything in the gospels point in this direction, unpack this wisdom of the cross and should be seen through the lens of that wisdom. It's what the sermon on the mount and the beatitudes are a case in point.

To say the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, the hungry for righteousness, the merciful and the pure in heart, to say theirs is the kingdom of God, theirs is the reign of heaven, is to place them on the resurrected grace side of the cross and all their opposites - the greedy, the wrathful, the unjust and deceitful the lustful of heart, all the anti-beatitudes on the side of the cross that grabs hold of the hammer and crucifies love.

The pastor and theologian Joseph Yoo in his substack says this of the beatitudes: “Jesus is not giving us spiritual homework, he is not saying go and become these things so that God will love you more, be meek, be poor, be a peacemaker, be persecuted, rather Jesus is referring to real people who are already living these realities, people who feel empty, people who are grieving, people who are longing for something, people, people who are exhausted and just trying to hold it together! He looks at them and says YOU are blessed, not someday, not once you improve, not once you fix your life, but right here and right now, you are blessed. The beatitudes are a mirror Jesus holds up to ordinary hurting human life and says ‘God sees you’, God is not distant from you but near to you.”¹ Just like God was with Jesus on the cross, right? That’s the radical wisdom of the cross that the beatitudes simply fleshes out. You are blessed, despite being a sinner or on the underside, despite the weight of the world that at times feels more like a curse, you are blessed... just as Jesus was on the cross. It’s foolishness to some and a stumbling block to others... and yet as the writer of proverbs says, “such wisdom has laid the foundations of the earth. Such wisdom is a tree of life to all who take hold of her, a tree of life abundant and bearing fruit for all under her branches.”² Amen.

¹ From Joseph Yoo’s Substack called “Off the Collar”, January 28, 2026

² Proverbs 3:18