

Sermon for January 29, 2017 – “Nobody Will Ever Be a Christian”

Westwood First Presbyterian Church

Pastor Jeff Colarossi

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year A – Text: 1 Corinthians 1:4-31

I was going through some CD's in my collection and I came across a few that were some of Bob Newhart's old stand-up comedy routines. Now, most of his old routines had Bob presenting an imaginary scenario, where he'd be one of the participants and act it out. All you'd hear would be what **his** character was saying. You'd have to use your imagination to fill in the rest of the dialogue. But, Bob did it in a way that was very vivid and, of course, very funny. Among his routines were: “Abe Lincoln vs. Madison Avenue”, “Merchandising The Wright Brothers”, “The Grace L. Ferguson Airline (And Storm Door Co.)”. Perhaps his most famous routine was “The Driving Instructor, but the one that came to my mind was the one entitled “Nobody Will Ever Play Baseball.” The scenario was a conversation between Abner Doubleday and a marketing representative from a game manufacturer. Bob played the part of the marketing guy and what you heard was the man listening to Doubleday as he tried to explain his new invention – baseball. It's clear that the longer the conversation goes on the worse of a job Doubleday is doing explaining how it's played. The marketing guy is just not being sold on this idea and thus, the title of the routine – “Nobody Will Ever Play Baseball.” Well, this got me to thinking...What if you had a similar scenario, but instead of baseball – the concept being sold was Christianity. What if, like Abner Doubleday, St. Peter had to sell some marketing person on the concept of Christianity? Someone whose job it was to decide whether this new religion is right for the public or not – and then market it?

I've titled this: “Nobody Will Ever Be a Christian.” Now I think the phone call would've taken place something like this; Hello, Vatican here. What can I do for you, Mr. Peter is it? Oh, just Peter. Okay, Peter. You've got a new religion, huh. Great, how many people? Everybody? Ah, all of humanity. Right. I see. That's a lot of people. Well, I mean, the ideal religion is 2-3 million people. You know, most live in the same general area, most of them look the same, think alike, dress alike, etc. You wanna keep it manageable. Oh, you say you want to invite different kinds of people to join, people who all think, act and talk differently than you do? You see, you've got a couple things against you right there. Well, all right, all right. Tell me more about it, like who you plan to worship? Jesus. Uh-huh. Oh, Jesus Christ. I see. Yeah. Tell me about Him. He's the son of a carpenter. From a small town in the Middle East? Israel? Is that it? Oh, He's not really the carpenter's son. Well, whose son is He, Peter? The Son of God. Oh, okay. Who's His mother? The Virgin Mary, huh? Do you mind explaining that? The Holy Spirit? Sorry I asked. Well, what's the Holy Spirit? The third person of the Trinity? What's the Trinity? Too complicated to explain over the phone, yeah, I'll bet! Well, okay, you got this Middle Eastern guy, the son of a carpenter that you want to worship. He was a carpenter too, I take it. Oh, He really didn't have a job? I see. Or a fixed address either? Well, what's so special about Him? He healed people, turned water into wine, raised people from the dead, walked on water; oh, a miracle worker? I see. Well, okay, what happened to Him? He was killed? How did He die? Crucified? I see. Who crucified Him? The Romans? Right. Why'd they crucify Him? Because He'd claimed to be the Messiah. I see...well, was He? He was. Okay, well, how do you know? Because He rose from the dead? After three days? How'd that happen? You don't know exactly? It had something to do with God. And when you got to the tomb it was empty? I see. Anyone witness it? You think maybe a couple of Roman guards? When did this happen?

Easter morning? Hmm, see, this might be a problem too. This is going to conflict with the basket people and the candy companies. My brother-in-law works for a firm that handles the marshmallow peep account. Easter's a real money maker for them. Anyway, is this Jesus up for promotional work? Where's He now? In heaven? How do you know? He what? He rose into the air, right. And before He did He told you to what? Baptize people? What's that? Wait, you do *what* in water? Hold on a minute, is this a joke? Is this one of the guys in accounting? Who is this? Look, Peter, that's the most complicated, convoluted religion I've ever heard of in my life. Nobody's ever gonna buy into it. It's foolish – forget it. Seriously. Peter, listen though, you come up with anything simpler, with fewer people and a little less complicated, you be sure and let us know. All right, Peter – I'll be talking with you. Goodbye.

So you see, when you try to tell the story like that logically and clearly – it isn't going to make sense to a lot of people. Especially the part about the crucifixion. That's as true now as it was 2,000 years ago. Back then you see the cross wasn't the symbol it is today. Why? Because the cross was a symbol of Roman occupation and torture. And so for many, the idea of worshipping someone who'd lived in occupied territory and who'd been killed by the occupiers was just plain **dumb**. Back then, people worshipped **power**. In those days you attached yourself to someone wealthier, more powerful, and more socially connected which meant that attaching yourself to a guy like Jesus made no sense. So this, at least in part, is what Paul means when he says that for some the message of the cross is foolishness. But else does Paul mean? Quite a bit actually, but I want to talk about three.

First, that the reason that some consider the cross and its message foolish is, he says, because people desire wisdom. People always have, but the world has changed. In the age of the 24-hour news cycle, the way we view the world (and, of course, religion) has changed. We expect, no, we demand proof. Yet even with proof some people won't believe. Which, of course, makes our task as Christians that much harder.

This leads to the second thing, and it has to do with our own understandings of Jesus. Our understanding of just who this crucified savior is and what it means to serve Him. Many accept Christianity on faith and need no proof. We know exactly who Christ is and have specific ideas about what it means to follow Him and just how we're to do that. But do we really? Sometimes I wonder. I mean, if you'd have told me 15 years ago that I'd be a pastor I'd have said that you were foolish (or words to that effect). I was very comfortable where I was, or so I tried to tell myself. I considered myself intelligent, even wise to some degree. To one extent or another we all do. This is what I think Paul is challenging. He asks: “**Where is the one who is wise?**” “**Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?**” Think of it this way, we all have different experiences and understandings of faith and church. Isn't it tempting to think that ours are the norm? That they should apply to everyone? Paul cautions us against this. He tells us that **Christ** is the power and wisdom of God; that even on His **worst** day God's wiser than we are. God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

We seem too focused on things that divide rather than on what ultimately has the power to unite; not just Christians, but **all** people. Which is, of course, the cross of Christ and what it stands for. This is the **third** thing. It's not simply that it stands as the symbol of God's love for us, but for the way in which God has worked throughout history. Think back to the Christmas story...The Messiah, the son of God, born in a stable? To a couple of nobodies? In the middle of nowhere? Even if CNN, MSNBC, or Fox News had been around back then would they have thought this was a story worth covering? I wonder... I mean, on its face, it's absurd. Imagine the reporter, facing the camera, stable in the background. “This is Wolf Blitzer, coming to you live from Bethlehem where a baby, allegedly the Son of the Creator of the universe, has just been born. Our medical experts question the validity of this.

While the Vatican refuses comment. We've received some conflicting reports from some of the locals, and we're waiting to talk to some shepherds who claimed to have seen, and I'm quoting here "an angel, accompanied by a multitude of the heavenly host." See what I mean? Doesn't it just seem, well, crazy? Maybe, certainly to some people, but that's how God works. It's how God's **always** worked. Almost from the beginning God has chosen to work in ways that confounds humankind's way of thinking and understanding. That what makes the story so remarkable. But what makes all this truly remarkable is this, and here's the thing, each of us has a part in the story. The constantly un-folding story of God and His people, the story of His plan for the world, the story of His love for the world. And even though we understand and experience it in different ways, even though there are those who will say that it's foolish, we have to share it. We have to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love. In a way, we're like reporters covering breaking news. We've a responsibility to tell that story to the world. We must go and tell the story for some have never heard the message of salvation from God's own holy Word.

Brothers and sisters, each and every day we have the opportunity to do so. A chance to recognize how God has shaped our lives, a chance to tell people how God can shape theirs, a chance to make our world and our community a better place to live.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.