Exodus 20:1-17

[Psalm 19](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=73#psalm_reading)

1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

[John 2:13-22](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=73#gospel_reading)

THE OLD STORY – Sermon for March 4, 2018

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

The Winter Olympics concluded a week ago today. About the only event I watched much of was curling because that's what was being broadcast at supper time, and I usually have the TV on at that time while I'm making supper or sitting down and eating. Curling, as everyone knows by now, is a fairly recent sport in which teams take turns sliding a heavy polished stone down a very slick lane of ice, while other members of the team run ahead of the stone sweeping furiously with something that looks like a sponge mop, while the person who launched the stone shouts out the word “Hard!” over and over again in various languages. For some reason, it's very enjoyable to watch and presumably to participate in.

It made me remember an old system I used to use to rank various sports on a scale, where one end of the scale was for sports which are based on some ordinary and natural human activity, and the other end for sports that are based on some extremely artificial and unnatural human activity.

So on one extreme of the scale, you find sports like foot races and the high jump and wrestling. These are sports in which excellence consists in taking some ordinary human physical activity – running, jumping, fighting – and becoming exceptionally good at it. I call these the pure sports.

On the other end of the scale, you find those sports that are based on taking some completely unnatural and essentially worthless human activity, and becoming exceptionally good at it. At the extreme limit of the scale, you find golf, in which excellence consists in taking an activity which has no conceivable natural human value or worth – hitting a hard little ball off the ground with a long stick – and becoming extremely skilled at that utterly worthless activity. Basketball is not far behind, based as it is on bouncing an inflated rubber ball at an extremely rapid rate, a skill which has no known use in the real world. Perhaps somewhat unfairly, I call these the silly sports.

It's kind of a game to think about where various competitive sports fall on this scale between pure sports and silly sports. And I think we might all agree that curling, even though it's mysteriously enjoyable to watch and seems to be rapidly growing in popularity to participate in, nonetheless clearly would rank pretty far along towards the silliness end of the scale. (Though nowhere near golf.)

I bring this up because I think it provides a helpful way of thinking about our readings for today, and the jumping off point for our reflection is what Paul had to say in the letter to the Corinthians. So let's read it again:

***1 Corinthians 1:18-25*** *1:18 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.
1:19 For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."
1:20 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?
1:21 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.
1:22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom,
1:23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,
1:24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.
1:25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

This is one of those passages of Paul that's sort of like a vein of coal, in that the more and deeper you dig into it, the richer the vein becomes. We're certainly not going to exhaust it this morning, but let's begin, at least, by digging into its opening verse.

*1:18 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.*

Paul is saying something very intriguing here, especially when we pay attention to what the subject of the sentence is. Notice that the subject is not 'the cross.' If you read quickly, you might think that Paul is talking about the Cross – perhaps the miracle of the cross, perhaps the atonement or the sacrifice of the cross. But that's not what Paul is saying. He doesn't say, the cross is foolishness to some, but to others the power of God.

What does he say? What is the subject of the sentence? It's “the message about the cross.” The message. And when you realize that, you realize what a truly extraordinary thing Paul is saying.

What follows immediately in the verse is not the extraordinary part. “The message about the cross is foolishness” to some. There's nothing mysterious about that. Messages can certainly and often do contain foolishness, and even true messages can certainly be perceived as foolish. Even today, the message of the cross - “Christ died for your sins – leaves many people scratching their heads.

So whether you accept it or not, at least the assertion that the message about the cross seems foolish to some is an understandable assertion.

But what about what comes next? The message about the cross is foolishness to some, but to others: what is it? Paul tells us: It is the power of God. The message about the cross is the power of God. Again, Paul doesn't say “The cross is the power of God.” He says, “The message about the cross is the power of God.”

And isn't that a truly amazing and even dumbfounding thing to say, when you stop and think about it.

When we think about God's power, don't we normally think of it in much more dramatic terms than that?

The author of Exodus certainly did. When He describes the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai as we read this morning, God is the one who makes the skies flash fire and the mountain tremble. God is a great and terrible presence, so great and terrible that people cannot even approach Him without dying. The power of God is visible and overwhelming and thunderous. That's real power. The power of an earthly King, only multiplied to infinity.

And similarly in the great nineteenth psalm we read this morning. The power of God is that which created the heavens and regulates the movement of the sun, the power that delivers and enforces the laws – both physical and moral – that regulate our lives.

And by-and-large, although it evolves and changes to some extent over time, that's the conception of God's power that fills to OT. It is something overwhelming and majestic, something awe-inspiring, we can even say, something inhuman.

But now come back to Paul, and what does Paul say? The message about the cross is the power of God. Such a humble, unassuming thing. Just talking about Christ and how He died on the Cross: that's the power of God.

A while back and in another context, we talked in this church about why God's plan of salvation is taking so long: two thousand years and counting. And our answer was because God limited himself to using a very simple tool, like demolishing Hoover damn with a pocketknife.

And here we have Paul telling us the nature of that tool. It's just, repeating the story of the Cross.

What are you saying? The skeptic might cry in disbelief. That the Almighty, Lord of Hosts, God Most High, who brought the universe into existence, who can dissolve the heavens and drain the seas with the bat of an eye, who could instill faith to move mountains in every single human being just by waving a hand, that that God has chosen to use the most unlikely, weakest, most fallible method imaginable to accomplish His most important goal? Just saying the same simple thing over and over. That's an insult to the majesty of God. That's blasphemous.

Well yes, yes it is. Paul calls it a stumbling block for the Jews “Stumbling block,” in the vocabulary of the day, that just means blasphemous.

But that’s crazy! the skeptic cries again. No sensible person uses the worst poorest possible tool available to do the job. Spread the Kingdom? You need parades with marching bands, fireworks, arenas full of people screaming at blaring music and charismatic performers, with jets flying in formation overhead. You need earthquakes and famines, wars and rumors of wars! That's how you get things done, that's how you motivate people, that's how you convert their hearts! Just telling them a simple little story? That's not just blasphemous, it's ridiculous!

Why yes, yes, it is, Paul says. It's foolishness to the Greek, foolishness to the thinking individual.

But here's the thing. However hard it is for us to make sense of this amazing limitation, it – and it alone – is the power of God. There is no Godly power unto salvation, outside of it.

If Paul were alive today, he might even compare it to making a wonderful and joyous sport out of the silliest activity imaginable, like pushing a polished rock down the ice and running ahead of it with sponge mops.

And so our prayer for this morning, O gracious God, is that from this morning on, You grant us opportunities to exercise Your power. Provide us with occasions for telling others the story of the cross. We don't need to scream it, we don't need a rock band to soften up the audience, we don't need to go to seminary or learn Hebrew. It's such a simple story. Jesus died on the cross for me. That's it. Help us tell it, Father, take away our shyness. Let us tell the old old story of Jesus and his love: that's our prayer, Lord, and we offer it in his name.