

North Kildonan United Church

7th March 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“The Wisdom of God’s Foolishness”

Exodus 20: 1-17

I Corinthians 1: 18-25

John 2: 13-22

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“Under the Influence” is the name of a CBC Radio One programme that has been on the air for almost a decade. The show tells the story of advertising, its history and development and ongoing influence on modern life. Each week Terry O’Reilly, the host and creator of the show, presents fascinating glimpses into the world of advertising and how that advertising has shaped and affected our purchasing habits, our understanding of our personal needs, and to some degree, our values and our culture.

We don’t often think too much about advertising, other than skimming over commercials on programmes we have recorded, but advertising has certainly shaped us and our society.

A good example is the red suited, white bearded, well-padded Santa Claus most people assume has been around for ever. We can thank Coca Cola for that enduring image. Here’s just a bit of history, from the Coca Cola Company website:

“The Santa Claus we all know and love — that big, jolly man in the red suit with a white beard — didn’t always look that way. In fact, many people are surprised to learn that prior to 1931, Santa was depicted as everything from a tall gaunt man to a spooky-looking elf. He has donned a bishop’s robe and a Norse huntsman’s animal skin. In fact, when Civil War cartoonist Thomas Nast drew Santa Claus for Harper’s Weekly in 1862, Santa was a small elflike figure who supported the Union. Nast continued to draw Santa for 30 years, changing the colour of his coat from tan to the red he’s known for today.”

The history continues: *“From 1931 to 1964, Coca-Cola advertising showed Santa delivering toys (and playing with them!), pausing to read a letter and enjoy a Coke, visiting with the children who stayed up to greet him, and raiding the refrigerators at a number of homes.”*

It’s hard to imagine Christmas without Santa Claus, or with Santa looking like anything other than the jolly non-Pepsi drinking toy deliverer we all know and love, courtesy of Coca Cola.

Such is the power of advertising. Each week Mr. O’Reilly reveals examples of the influence advertising has on our daily living, advertising which has at it’s very heart, the goal of selling more product, whether needed or not. In a real sense, examining the content of advertising is a way of understanding the world in which we live.

Think for instance of how our cultural values are shaped and influenced. For how many decades did we think nothing of buying Aunt Jemima pancake mix or syrup,

complete with its depiction of a black woman on the package? Was this a fair portrayal of a woman of colour and was the presence of such a woman a subtle hint that she might be a maid or servant preparing your breakfast? Many have felt such portrayals to be insulting to the Black community and from what I understand, the name of the product will be completely changed, removing all stereotyping, either by name or image, on the packaging.

If we acknowledge that the purpose of advertising is to encourage people to buy something, whether it's actually needed or not, we might also ask what the wisdom of our world is selling us, wanting us to buy into?

The world values power and wealth and strength and beauty. Uncomfortable realities, such as growing old, being unwell, poverty and so on, have little place in worldly wisdom. We deny the reality of death by the language we use, such as saying passed or passed on instead died, by the stories or dreams we tell ourselves about life after this life, by our discomfort with the entire subject of death. Humans have conquered many things but never death. For worldly wisdom, death is the end of the story and any solid hope of life beyond this life is merely a fable, a fairy tale, pious nonsense.

What did St Paul say: *“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.”* Not a fairy tale or pious nonsense.

For Paul, hope, real hope, is to be found in the cross of Jesus Christ. Human wisdom is basically philosophical rambling that in the end still results in death. That same wisdom sees the story of the death and resurrection of Christ as unreal, as just a made up story, and so the gospel is rejected.

And perhaps we can partly understand why the gospel was rejected as so much foolishness.

Paul would enter a pagan city, perhaps a city that prided itself on its wisdom and intellectual prowess. A city of lively debates and probing questions in search of the truth.

Into such a city Paul would begin to tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth. And who was this Jesus? He was a man who had been crucified by the Romans but raised from the dead by God, and who was now the Lord of the world and this same Jesus called all who would listen to live lives of faithful obedience. How crazy is that, the wise murmured to themselves. This was not some smart new philosophy worth debating. No, this message from Paul was sheer madness. How can you base a faith upon an executed criminal from a despised race? Send him on his way, he's wasting our time. But perhaps not all who heard Paul felt that his message was hollow. The seeds of Paul's preaching would take root and grow, not with all, but with some.

And when Paul would preach to his fellow Jews, the responses weren't much different. If Jesus was the promised Messiah, how in heaven's name could the Messiah be executed by Rome? After all, for the Jews of this time, the Messiah was to defeat the pagans, such as the Romans, not be killed by the pagans. This Jesus couldn't be the promised one and that was that. But perhaps not for all the listeners. Some heard what Paul was preaching and their hearts began to be touched in a way as never before, and

perhaps, just perhaps, this Jesus was who Paul said he was, and more importantly, still is.

When you think of it, if you were so foolish or so enterprising to start your own religion, as perhaps some of Paul's listeners thought that's what he was doing, you would never tell a story like the story of Jesus. Popular wisdom would be attracted to a religion based on success and reward and victory and power. A religion based on promises of wealth and a trouble-free life, with no sacrifice. A religion with no losers, only winners, drawn from the best society has to offer. Certainly for this religion to grow and prosper it could not be a religion centred around a Roman instrument of torture and execution. How foolish would that religion be? Who would want to be a follower of a teacher who tells them to take up their cross, to lose their life for the sake of gaining their life. What's the fun and profit in that?

In his first letter to the Corinthians, St Paul contrasts the wisdom of the world to the wisdom of God.

"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.

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 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."

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Ian Markham comments this way.

"The message is paradoxical. God's definitive disclosure of what God is like is in powerlessness.... The Creator of the universe, whom we understandably associate with power (after all, the universe is a big entity to create), reveals God's true nature by becoming weak and vulnerable. It is difficult for anyone to understand; so it is not surprising that Paul's Jewish and Greek contemporaries both find it puzzling. It is not simply the message that is paradoxical, but also the community in which the message is birthed. The church is not made up of the powerful, the wise and the aristocratic, but the weak, the foolish and the poor. God wants a countercultural community to witness to a paradoxical gospel. In an echo of the Gospels, those least esteemed become the most important in the church."

The wisdom of God's foolishness.

Think of what this means. The good news of Jesus Christ is all about God dying on a garbage dump in a backwater of the Roman Empire. It's all about God talking nonsense to a room full of philosophers. It's all about the true God confronting and overthrowing the power, posturing and prestige of the world in order to establish God's

kingdom, a kingdom in which the weak and the foolish find themselves just as welcome as the strong and the wise, if not more so.

Father O'Malley translates the final verses of today's text this way:

“Jews demand signs; Greeks want rational proof. Despite them, we staunchly preach Christ crucified and reborn! Jews call us gullible fools; Gentiles call us absurd. But we, whose hearts He's grasped, feel the power in the mangled Christ, the power and wisdom of God. Human minds are too puny to capture His. God's foolishness is too profound for human wisdom. God's weakness is more powerful than human strength.”

Amen.