

**Rev. Dr. David Holyan**  
**“God Does the Choosing”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, February 2, 2020**

**I Corinthians 1:1-24**

*Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,  
To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every  
place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:  
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have  
been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind — just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you — so that  
you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so  
that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son,  
Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there  
should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by  
Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I  
belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you  
baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were  
baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For  
Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be  
emptied of its power.*

*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. For it is  
written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' 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 the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

**I Corinthians 1:25-31**

*For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call,  
brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God  
chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and  
despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the  
source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order  
that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of  
your Holy Spirit. I pray that you take the words that each of us are carrying within, the words that we have from 1 Corinthians,  
the words of our songs and prayers, and especially the words that you've laid on my heart to share this morning. Touch, bless,  
and transform all of these words into the word of Christ, and let that word speak to each of us. Let that word do whatever it  
needs to do within us, whether it is a comforting word or a challenging word, a word of grace and mercy, a word of restraint or  
caution. Let it be Christ's word that each of us hear. I ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

Paul can be a bit energetic in what he writes, often tapping into an image and then running with it and running with it and running with it to the point where you might say, "Okay, Paul. That's enough." And in this passage that Karen began and I have picked up on, it's very clear that what Paul is trying to do is set the tension between the wisdom of the world or those of us who think we're wise, and what he calls the foolishness of Christ. Proclaiming Christ crucified, the power of God, all of those things that he says are foolish whether it's by proclamation or a stumbling block to the Jews, it's just foolishness to believe that God would actually come and be a part of us, that Christ would take on the power of God and be at work among us, live within us. All of this, he says, is essentially just crazy. No one can be proud of this. And the reason that he sets up this tension is because after having visited the church in Corinth, the small group that said, "Yes, I hear what you're saying and I believe in Jesus Christ," began to differentiate among themselves as to who was their leader. Some said their leader was Paul because he preached, some said it was Apostles, and some said Christ.

So essentially you've got one group in the congregation saying, "I'm better than you because I trust Paul and what he did." And others are saying, "No, no. I'm better because I follow Apostles." And on and on it goes. I know it seems like that's something that could happen 2,000 years ago when the church is formed in Corinth, but it probably doesn't happen much today because clearly, we as Christians who are mature, who are in the tradition 2,000 years after the resurrection of Jesus, we've obviously grown beyond this sense of tribalism where whatever I'm involved in is better than whatever you're involved in. So maybe I just need to be a fool, sit down, and shut up. Thank you for not responding to that [laughter]. It was bit of a rhetorical.

Anybody that thinks that Kirkwood is not the best school in the state didn't go to Kirkwood. No. [laughter]. Right? Because the best school in the state is whatever school she went to. Kirkwood is second best or maybe not because I don't know how many schools she visited. But let's say she went to two high schools, then she's going to have to decide which one was better, which one was second place, and then it doesn't matter because everything else is just not anything that I was involved in. I happen to know that Princeton Theological Seminary is the best seminary on the planet because I went there [laughter]. Karen will try to say, "No, David. There's a school in Boston that's really good." And I'm like, "Yeah, but it's second-rate." [laughter]. Because, obviously, the school that I went to is better than any other school and that's just the way it is. She would tell me that the school she went to was the best because she went there and the school that I went to, eh, it's okay. Right? It's human nature. It's what we do. And we do it without even thinking about it. Anything we're involved in is better than anything that someone else is involved in that we've never experienced.

I felt this rise up in me not too long ago when one of the congregants said to me, "Oh, I'm going to go have spine surgery again." And I said, "Oh, really? Who's doing your surgery?" [laughter]. She told me the doctor is in the same group as the doctor who did my first four surgeries and I thought to myself, "Oh, my gosh. Why are you letting that man cut you open?" [laughter]. "Don't you know he's second-rate?" Now, I didn't say this out loud, thankfully, but it was the first thought I had. And then I had to stop and go, wait a minute, the reason that I think my physician is better than her physician is simply because he's my doctor. The reason she thinks her doctor is better than mine is because it's her doctor. It happens all the time and we don't even think about it.

Which church is the best church in Kirkwood, Missouri? We are taking notes [laughter]. Which choir is the best church choir? Right? [applause] Is that because they're the best or is it because they're ours? [laughter]. Yes. You have to say that. You're in church. [laughter]. Right? It's just so in us we don't even think about it. We become the center of our creation. Anything that we experience becomes the best. Anything else becomes second-rate. It's just part of who we are. And what Paul says about that is that all of that thinking needs to go away because in the tussle between wisdom, which in our experience is thinking that we're better than someone else, in all of that tussling between who's wiser, who's better, this, that, and the other, in all of what Paul says none of that matters because the wisdom that we think is wise is actually just foolish. And what is really wise is the foolishness of what God has done for all of us through Jesus Christ. God has chosen to act in our world through the prophets, through our ancestors, but most significantly and powerfully through the person of Jesus Christ. And through that person all of us are saved, all of us are made righteous, all of us are sanctified, all of us are redeemed, all of us have our life, and all of us come to know God. Because God chose us. And what happens in our lives and in our world and in our human nature is that we forget that God is the first act. God acts we respond. And when we forget that, we end up thinking that we're wiser than we actually are. And more dangerous, is we think that we're better than others. Because our human nature says, "Whatever I'm involved in is better than what you're involved in." Paul says, "No." That God is the source of our life. God acts. God chooses. God brings us together. And if anyone boasts in anything we have to boast about that. That God the Almighty has chosen to save us, redeem us, be with us through Jesus Christ. That is it.

But our culture doesn't operate that way. Our human nature doesn't operate that way. Instead, we operate sort of like what Irving Berlin wrote in the classic 1946 Broadway show *Annie Get Your Gun*. There's a song that goes, "Anything you can do I can do better. I can do anything better than you. No, you can't. Yes, I can. No, you can't. Yes, I can. No, you can't. Yes, yes, yes, I can. Anything you can be I can be greater. Sooner or later I'm greater than you. Any note you can reach I can go higher. I can sing anything higher than you. Anything you can buy I can buy cheaper. I can buy cheaper. Anything cheaper than you. Anything you can say I can say softer. I can say softer anything than you. Any note you can hold I can hold longer. I can hold any note longer than you. No, you can't. Yes, I can." It is part of us. And he captured that. And in a sense our world still operates in that mode. Anything you can do I can do better. And if we're not careful we let that guide us in our decisions, in our understanding, and I think, again most dangerously in our relationships. We assume superiority. And instead what Paul is asking us to do is to remember our unity in Christ first.

So as I was thinking about all this stuff I made a hospital visit yesterday. I had to go to Mercy Hospital. I walk in the door. I verify the room. And I need to make my way to the farthest away elevators backed by the cafeteria. And I walk by all these plaques that talk about a woman named Catherine McCauley. And I'm asking myself, "Is she related to Franklin McCauley?" Who many of you know as the past principal at the high school. Who is very famous, outspoken, and great guy. One of the things that it says in the first plaque is, "Our healing ministry is founded upon the healing ministry of Jesus Christ." And I'm thinking, "Okay, that's a great foundation for a hospital." And I see Catherine McAuley's name everywhere as the founder of this hospital and movement. And I'm asking myself, "Who is she and how did she get into the hospital business?" So I did a little research, and this is what I found. She was born in Dublin, Ireland. And when she was five years old, in 1783, her father died. And when she turned 20, her mom died. Because her parents had both passed away, she and her brother James moved in with some relatives of her mother, several times removed, who was a childless, wealthy Quaker couple. And she lived with them, and took care of them, and taught all the kids in the community religious instruction for 20 years. And, finally, when the gentleman of the family died in 1822, Catherine McAuley became the sole heir of his entire estate, and the man was worth a ton of money. And like every other human being, she's got this instinct of, "Anything you can do, I can do better." So I'm thinking, even though they didn't have it back in the early 1800s, what she probably did was created an Instagram account that showed her sitting with all her millions, and her private jet, and her new Ferrari, and her big clothes, and thought, "I'm going to see how many followers I can get because I'm so rich now." No. What she decides to do is take all that money and put it to use caring for other people. With two other women, she created a home in Dublin where she took care of destitute women, the homeless, and provided care and education to children. She did this for many years until she was 50. And then one of her friends who was connected to a religious order told her that she's doing a lot of work like many of the nuns were doing in other parts of Ireland and around the world. So she got interested in that, and she studied the Carmelites and the Sisters of Charity and thought, "You know what? These women have great values, and I want to build something on that foundation."

So, eventually, she became religious, changed her name to Sister Mary Catherine, and officially created the Sisters of Mercy-- Three women in Dublin, Ireland in the 1800s. She died in 1841. That happens to be the same year that the sisters came to St. Louis and founded the Sisters of Mercy medical outreach that we now know of as Mercy or the Mercy healthcare system. They have 44,000 employees now in Missouri, Kansas, Arkansas, and a few other states, and they're moving into Texas and other places. All of that because she decided to put her newfound wealth to the service of others. I remember a conversation that I had with a congregant years ago who I sat down with and we were talking about some money that she was giving to one of the things that we were working on. And she said, "You know what? I gave that money, and my financial advisor called me and said, "Don't do that again." And I said, "Really?" She's like, "Yeah, I shouldn't do that again. He thinks it's foolish for me to do that." There it is. Doing something for others in the way that God has done for us through Jesus Christ, the world looks at it and says, "That's foolish." Anyone looking at Catherine McAuley and thinking that she gave her fortune away to start a health ministry with only two other women in a small house in Dublin, Ireland, "That's foolish." Thank God it's foolish. Because all the care that they provide now in our region and around the world, so many people are being helped. Someone's foolishness when it's grounded in Jesus Christ becomes blessing and goodness for someone else. So Paul is telling us, "Be careful of where we draw the lines. Be careful of thinking that what we do is the best. And realize that what God has done in our lives and continues to do, when the world looks at it, they're going to say, "You're just being a fool." Amen.