

ALEXAMENOS WORSHIPS HIS GOD: GOD'S HOLY FOOLS

Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

If someone were to draw a picture...

The earliest surviving picture of Jesus was scratched on a barrack room wall in the city of Rome about 200 A.D. In the crude graffiti a human body, drawn from the backside, is stretched on a stick cross. The head of a donkey sprouts from the naked torso. Below and to the side, a figure vaguely resembling a character on *King of the Hill* raises his left arm in prayer and praise to the donkey on the cross. The unknown artist, probably a Roman soldier, completed the sketch with a mocking comment, "Alexamenos worships his god". Who was Alexamenos and what happened to him? *Alexamenos?* He may have been a soldier. He may have been a slave. He was certainly a Christian. We don't know anything more about Alexamenos, but we know very well who the figure on the cross is. Only one religion has ever centered on a crucified Palestinian Jew.

Years before the figure was scratched on the wall a traveling Jewish evangelist wrote to Christians living in Corinth, "We preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness". The crude graffiti of the donkey-headed Jesus on the cross is a measure of just *how* foolish the preaching of the cross was. The crude cartoon is not only the earliest representation of Jesus; it's also the earliest depiction of Roman crucifixion. To be a Christian, then and now, is to worship a crucified God who suffers, bleeds and dies.

Notice how Paul introduces the message of the cross in his letter to the Corinthians. He began his letter by expressing thanks to God for their many gifts. The problem was, these gifted Christians were divided. Paul was deeply disturbed by reports of their quarrels. He reminds them that they've been united in Christ through baptism. Their factions, divisions and quarrels, he says, come as a result of *worldly wisdom* rather than *the wisdom of God*.

Christians get caught up in rivalries because we glory in the impressive human wisdom of the age. "Look out for number one!" "I'm right, you're wrong!" "Win through intimidation." "I'm going to do whatever it takes to win." "Don't get involved!" "You've got your life to lead." *money talks Buy low, sell high Environ* "Business is business." But God has revealed in Christ another kind of wisdom that radically subverts the wisdom of the world. God has chosen to save the world from divisions, quarrels, factionalism, nationalism, terrorism and war through the cross of Christ.

How do we Christians deal with people who differ from us, who live a different life-style and have the nerve to call themselves Christians? How do we deal with people in our own family with whom we disagree? We quarrel. We choose sides. We divide and conquer. We distort what they say to make us look good and them bad. We find creative ways to put down our enemies. We let them know in a thousand subtle ways, verbal and non-verbal, what we think of them. *like the graffiti* That's the world's wisdom. Too much of the world's wisdom has found a comfortable home in the church of Jesus Christ. We still prefer the world's wisdom to the foolishness of the cross.

Edwin Markham wrote a poem contrasting the world's wisdom with God's wisdom:

*He drew a circle that shut me out --
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win
I drew a circle that took him in!*
On the cross Jesus was shut out for our circle was and our enemies.

← Paul said, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise." Here's a story of a fool who got into an argument with a friend. Chloe and Apollos used to be good friends until they had a serious argument. I don't know the details. There was a quarrel. Angry shouting. Four-letter words were hurled like hand grenades. The two of them haven't spoken to one another since. Their kids are forbidden to play with one another. Recently Chloe received a nasty letter from Apollos warning her kids to stay out of his yard. Apollos doesn't speak to

Chloe anymore. They belong to the same church but Apollos has stopped attending – maybe ^{because of his bitter attitude} because of the dispute. Chloe was so angry with Apollos. That was months ago. What did Chloe finally do?

I asked her. She said, “I sent Apollos a box of his favorite chocolates”.

I said, “What?”

“Yes,” she said, “and I enclosed a note - ‘From an old friend’”.

“That was kind of foolish. You’re just rewarding bad behavior.”

“That’s not all I did,” Chloe said. “I sent Apollos a letter.

“Ah! You really gave him a piece of your mind.”

“I did. I said I was sorry we were no longer friends. I was sorry I hadn’t seen him in church for awhile.”

I said, “What possessed you to do a fool thing like that?”

Chloe said, “At first, I was really angry and wanted revenge. I didn’t want to do anything to make ~~myself~~ ^{myself} look bad but I wanted to shame and embarrass him. Then I began to think of how Apollos and I use to worship together. We sang in the choir. We prayed together. We helped in the kitchen. Our kids loved playing together. We were good friends.”

So I asked Chloe, “What’s been the response of Apollos?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ll just have to wait.”

And I thought, “What a crazy fool you are.”

Did you hear that Mohammed Ali tried to communicate with the Muslim fanatics in Pakistan who kidnapped and threatened to kill the Wall Street Journal reporter, Daniel Pearl? He counseled them, “Treat him like you’d want an enemy of Islam to treat you if captured.”

Where’d he get a fool idea like that?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. use to preach a lot of foolishness. He was preaching to some enemies who reviled and persecuted him. He said, "We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you, but we will not obey your evil laws. We will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer. So in winning the victory we will not only win freedom for ourselves, but we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that you will be changed also. The victory will be a double victory: We will defeat the evil system and win the hearts and souls of the perpetrator of the evil system." Where'd he get a fool idea like that?

I keep thinking of the picture of the crucified donkey. If your enemy were to draw a picture of the God you worship, what kind of God would he or she draw?

*...the God I love and worship, reigns in sorrow on
the Tree,
Broken, bleeding, but unconquered, very God of God to me."*

Back in the fourth century, Saint Athanasius wrote something really foolish to pagans.

He said, "Only on the cross does one die with one's arms stretched out." He explained, "The Lord had to stretch out his hands, that with the one He might draw the ancient people and with the other those of the Gentiles and that he might join both in himself." Where'd he get a fool idea like that? *Try to think enemies ... include the gods* The arms of God stretched out on the cross to *destroy* the wisdom of the wise; to destroy his enemies in a new and creative way – by turning them into friends by the blood of the cross.

Bloody Lord, you are just too real. Blood is sticky, repulsive, frightening. We do not want to be stuck with a sacrificial god who bleeds. We want a spiritual faith about spiritual things; things bloodless and abstract. We want sacrificial spirits, not sacrificial bodies. But you have bloodied with your people, Israel and your son, Jesus. We fear that by being Jesus' people we too might have to bleed. If such is our destiny, we pray that your will, not ours, be done. Amen. [Duke University professor, Stanley Hauerwas]