

God's Foolishness

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

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Try for just a moment to step outside of your faith. Try to look at Christianity from some objective point outside of the church and your beliefs. To an outsider, it must appear a bit odd, to say the least, that there is a major religion that claims that the most important divine action in history is the humiliating execution of a poor peasant convicted of sedition. What's more, the devotees of this religion prominently display replicas of the instrument used to torture and kill that poor peasant. It is certainly counter-intuitive. The apostle Paul acknowledges how weird this is. He wrote that the message of the cross is foolishness to those people who are in the process of perishing. However, for those who are in the process of being saved, the message of the cross is the power of God.

The story of our relationship with God is filled with God's foolishness. There wasn't a cloud in the sky but Noah was told to build an ark. Abraham was doing just fine in the city of Ur when God told him to pack up and hit the road. Never mind where you are going; I'll let you know later. Moses was minding his own business and a flock of sheep. God sent him to go talk to the most powerful ruler on earth. God favored a tiny clan of folks and told them to be a light to all the other nations. Silly stuff. Improbable stuff. Foolish stuff.

One of the newer joys in my life is going to Thomasville Bulldog football games. I call Texas home and in Texas, football is serious and passionate. My high school had a great band - and a below average football team. When I attended Texas A&M, the band won every halftime, but the football program was in a multi-year drought. Every team I ever cared about drained the joy of football out of me. Decades later I moved to Thomasville. Some things looked familiar. There were lots of players on the team. There were lots of coaches on the sidelines. What wasn't familiar was that, a lot of nights, I was sitting on the winning side. These days I get season tickets and have a good time. Sure, part of the fun is hot dogs and nachos. There's good company where I sit and an enthusiastic crowd filling the stands. It's nice that the Bulldogs often win. And all of those formative years in Texas may still have some influence!

Let me ask you a hypothetical question. These days, there's a lot of concern about safety in school. Some schools even have metal detectors at the entrance doors. How would you feel if Thomasville high school was approached, and asked to play a team from a juvenile prison as part of their schedule? Would you be willing to consider it? How nervous would you be about having convicted felons on the field against the Bulldogs? What security measures do you think would be appropriate?

Whether it's high school, college, or professional, football is a cultural giant in Texas. It is pervasive. It saturates society. It's as big a passion as soccer is in England. Vince Lombardi must have had Texas in mind when he said, "winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." There are a lot of stories about the lengths that coaches, players, and parents will go to, to try to make sure that the team wins. It's like there's no other consideration. Winning is the only thing they see or think about. As Thomasville Bulldog fans, you can relate to much of the Texas football culture. Let me tell you a true story, a little story, a silly story, a foolish story.

Grapevine Texas is a prosperous part of the greater Dallas metropolitan area. Grapevine takes its football seriously. Faith Christian school has 70 players 11 coaches, the latest and best equipment, and hordes of involved parents. In November of 2008, the Lions of Faith Christian School had a 7 to 2 record going into a game with the Gainesville State Tornados. Gainesville State was going into the game with a 0 in 8 record and had only scored two touchdowns all year. They had 14 players playing with old pads and dilapidated helmets. As they got off their bus, they were escorted by twelve security guards who took their handcuffs off before the game. You see, Gainesville State is a maximum security prison north of Dallas. Many of the players on the Tornados team had convictions for drugs, assault, and robbery. Many of their families had disowned them. They play all of their games on the road. Given this situation, what special arrangements do you think Faith Christian High School made?

The head coach at Faith Christian High School was Chris Hogan. He knew what his team was facing- and he made special arrangements. When the Gainesville State Tornados ran onto the field, they crashed through a banner that read "Go Tornados!" that had been made by Faith High School fans. They ran through a 40 foot long spirit line made up of cheering fans who called them by name. Sitting on their benches at the sideline, they heard 200 fans behind them in the stands cheering for them – and there were even cheerleaders leading the fans. One of the Tornado players said, "We can tell people are a little afraid of us when we come to the games, but these people, they were yelling for us! By name!" Another player said, "I never thought I'd hear people cheering for us to hit their kids!"

Faith High School beat the Tornados 33 to 14. But the Tornados were so excited that they gave their coach a Gatorade bath, perhaps the first one in history for a coach who had a zero in nine record. After the game, the teams met in the middle of the field to pray. One of the Tornados surprised everybody by asking to lead the prayer. He prayed, "Lord, I don't know how this happened, so I don't know how to say thank you, but I never would have known there were so many people in the world that cared about us."

The guards escorted the Tornados back to their bus. Each player was given a bag filled with hamburgers, fries, candy, a Bible, and an encouraging letter from a player on the Faith Christian High School team. An ESPN sportswriter said it was "like rivers running uphill and cats petting dogs." Isaiah put it another way. "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them." (Isaiah 11:6)

Jeff Paschal wrote that, "The cross declares that we embrace truth when lies seem easier, gentleness when force is attractive, justice for the oppressed when maintaining the status quo would be simpler, generosity when hoarding would be more comfortable, forgiveness when a hateful grudge would taste so good."¹

That November night in Grapevine, Texas was filled with God's foolishness. Fans treated convicted criminals warmly. Parents rooted for players on the opposing team. People went to a

¹ Jeff Paschal, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2008) p91

good deal of trouble to encourage strangers that they might never see again. Players gave gifts to players on the opposing team. None of this was common sense. It all ran against the grain of conventional wisdom. It ripped Texas football culture to shreds. All of this happened because the Faith High School head coach sent out an email that read, "Here's the message that I want you to send. You are just as valuable as any other person on Planet Earth." What a weird concept! Hospitality for the stranger. Treating others as you would like to be treated. Loving your enemies. Foolishness -- every bit of it! God's foolishness! And, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom." May we find ways to be so foolish! Amen.

^{NRS} **Isaiah 29:14** so I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing. The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden. (Isa 29:14 NRS)

^{NRS} **Isaiah 55:8** For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. (Isa 55:8 NRS)

For more on this football game see Rick Reilly, "There Are Some Games When Cheering for the Other Side Feels Better than Winning," ESPN: The Magazine (December 28, 2008), <http://sports.espn.go.com/espnmag/story?section=magazine&id=3789373>