

Pick a Title:
“Are You Being Saved?” or
“Weakness Stronger than Strength; Foolishness Wiser than Wisdom” or
“What? Another Scandal?!”

I know that some of you might not pay all that much attention to sermon titles. But I do. And I really had a hard time settling on one this week. Because any of these three could work. And all three include themes Paul is talking about. So I’m not really asking you to pick one. I’m going with all three.

There are some who love the question, “Are you saved?” Not “Are you being saved?” but “Are you saved?” Have you ever been asked that? It can imply that salvation is a “once for all” affair, a status that one obtains simply by believing the right things and saying the right words. And as if once one says those words (and once is all it takes), one can forever after answer, “Yes. I’m saved.”

But not the Apostle Paul. The verb Paul very intentionally uses here (a “present passive participle,” in case you’re interested in such things) makes it clear that for him, salvation is less a point of arrival than an ongoing process—in fact one that lasts a lifetime. For Paul, salvation turns everything on its head, and keeps it that way. Everything we thought was important. Everything we held as true.

As an aside, I used to be able to stand on my head. Which strikes me as a fitting, yoga-like pose for understanding both salvation and Paul. But now about all I can do is get on my knees and bend over, with my face to the ground and my body prostrate. Which turns out is an even more fitting pose for understanding salvation. And Paul.

For Paul, there is a weakness that is stronger than strength, and a foolishness that is wiser than wisdom. And he sums that weakness and foolishness up with two words, which we find in verse 18, namely “the cross.”

In his sermon last week, which he titled “Through the Woods” (in case you pay attention to sermon titles ☺) Wendell Loewen talked about “dying to self,” and about how learning what it means to die to self, and then doing so, is precisely what it takes to pass “through the woods” into the lush, glorious meadow which lies beyond.

Turns out it was Jesus who showed us what that looks like to die to self. Something like this [hold out arms like on a cross]. Which looks a little bit like a cross (like the one we have hanging about the chancel. Not to mention the one hanging around my neck.)

Paul calls the cross a “scandal.” *Skandalon*, in Greek. Which can also be translated as “stumbling block.” Something that is not merely counterintuitive but highly offensive. For Jesus—the Christ; the “Son of God”—to die on a cross was highly offensive to the broader culture. Because it was about as low down as you could get. Would we really want to celebrate the electric chair as the most important symbol of our faith? Would we want to wear one around our neck? Do we really want to worship the image of death row inmate being strapped to a table and put to death by injection [arms like a cross]? Something typically reserved for the most heinous of criminals, and crimes?

Why would Jesus be willing to die this way? And why would God allow it to happen? He did it—they did it—to teach us that it is only by getting this low [arms like a cross] that we can truly be raised up.

The world tries to convince us what it means to have status, to be important, or even just to be “good.” Every day, as soon as we get up, the world hands us a checklist, that we are supposed to complete. Education (check). Good looks (check). A well-paying job (check). A large house (check). Eloquence in speech (check). Popular with your classmates (check). Highly esteemed by your co-workers (check. How are y’all doing so far?)

Dying to self hands you a whole new checklist, that looks something like this. 1) Humiliation (check). 2) Shame (check). 3) Poverty in spirit (check). 4) Poverty in lifestyle (not sure I’m ready to check that one yet; that’s hard. I like my house, and my things. Including my new mandolin). 5) Thinking of others more highly than oneself. (Why would I do that? I’m the most important person I know! 😊) 6) Loving others more than you love yourself. (No way I’m ready to check that!)

The Apostle Paul had been doing pretty well on his worldly checklist. Education (let’s see, I’m a Pharisee; check). Righteousness as measured by the law (Pharisee, check). Importance in the eyes of others (Pharisee, check). Until Jesus came to him on the road to Damascus. Knocked him on his proverbial can. Turned everything upside down [arms like a cross]. (Interestingly, it’s generally thought that Paul ended up being beheaded for claiming Jesus as Lord, rather than crucified. It’s also thought that the Apostle Peter was literally crucified upside down. Way to go, Peter! You really got as low as you can get!)

And now Paul is in process of teaching the new believers in Corinth what it means to follow Jesus and claim him as Lord, what it looks like to die to self [arms like a cross]. Keep reading First Corinthians to learn more; it gets really good. But it basically, it comes down to this. Jesus wants to come to us, just like he came to Paul. He wants to knock us on our, well, can. Are we ready to let him?

Or let’s try this: Are you being saved? Is your life a scandal in the eyes of the world? If not, maybe it ought to be.

Let’s pray. God, may we continue, each day, seek the weakness that is stronger than strength, and the foolishness that is wiser than wisdom. Amen.