

## Signs

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

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*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. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

At the end of my street stands a metal pole about seven or eight feet tall. And atop that metal poll is a sheet of galvanized steel cut into the shape of an octagon. And that octagon has been painted with red reflective paint. And in the middle of that red octagon, in capital white letters, also painted with reflective paint, are the letter S...T...O...P.

Each and every time I leave my house and venture beyond my street, I come to that red octagon atop that metal poll. And each and every time, when I come to it, whether I'm driving a car or walking or following my kids on their bikes, we stop.

And I've been thinking about signs and symbols and their power in recent days. Did you ever stop and think about a stop sign? I wonder who it was years ago that sat down in a room and decided that a red octagon would be the symbol for stop. I wonder what was choice number 2. Maybe it was a purple pentagon, who knows. But the point is that some time ago, we decided as a society that a red octagon would be the sign for stop.

And from generation to generation, we have passed that meaning along. From a very early age, before children can read, we teach them about that red octagon. We consider it so important to our collective public safety that we have laws on the books and civil and criminal penalties to be enforced should one of us fail to observe and respond appropriately to a stop sign.

But unless something has gone very wrong, it is never the stop sign itself that brings us to a stop, is it? It is not the sign itself that does the stopping. What brings us to a stop is our

response to the sign. That is, it's only when we *see* the sign *and respond to it* in a *mutually-agreed upon* way that the sign accomplishes its intended purpose. If we don't see the sign, or if we ignore the sign, or if we choose to not respond to the sign, then the sign itself is useless. It's *the meaning* we collectively negotiate and attach to the sign that gives it its power.

From time to time, the meaning behind the signs and symbols we use gets renegotiated. And when that happens, it almost always brings conflict and tension. When I was a small boy, for a season, the United States considered switching to the metric system, which is used by most of the rest of the world to measure weights and distances. And it was chaos.

But the chaos had nothing to do with our inability to understand the difference between yards and meters or pounds versus kilograms. It had everything to do with our struggle to collectively renegotiate the meaning behind signs and symbols we use to communicate everyday things like weight and distance. The issue wasn't the sign itself. The issue was the confusion in the shared meaning behind the sign.

As a nation, we've been having some conversations about signs and symbols in our national discourse this summer in the form of debates and arguments about Civil War statues and the names of streets and parks and schools. Prior to last week's landfall of Hurricane Harvey, this issue dominated the letters to the editor in the Fort Worth Star Telegram.

In the very little bit of genealogy research I have done, I have discovered that I have an ancestor who fought in the Civil War. He was captured while defending Vicksburg, Mississippi, in the summer of 1863. He was sent to a prison camp on an island in the middle of the Delaware River where he remained until the spring of 1865, when he was freed as part of a prisoner exchange program. His descendant was my grandfather on my mother's side, who, in an odd coincidence, was himself taken prisoner by the Nazis and spent the last days of World War II aboard a boxcar and then in a prison camp before being liberated and returned home.

And so as our nation and our communities are having these conversations about statues and flags and signs and symbols, I feel as though I have something of a distant personal connection. Now, to be honest, before Charlottesville and subsequent events, I never gave those statues and flags much of a second thought.

In fact, as a kid, I can remember playing with my Dukes of Hazzard cars, including the General Lee, with the Stars and Bars right there across the rooftop. When I lived in Atlanta, we would sometimes take out of town guests to Stone Mountain to see the relief carving of General Lee and General Jackson and Jefferson Davis, which locals affectionately call the Mount Rushmore of the South. Such are the benefits of the privilege that I bear as a white man. For

me, I those signs were just part of the landscape, just part of being raised as a “Good Southern Boy,” things to which I really never paid much attention or gave much consideration.

But after Charlottesville, as a nation, we’re having some long overdue conversation about those signs and symbols. And I’ve learned that some of my neighbors have not had the same privilege as I have had. Some of them have not had the luxury of not paying attention to these signs or giving them much consideration.

Rather than ignoring those signs or seeing them as symbols of a “Glorious Lost Cause” or “states rights” or memories of “The War of Northern Aggression,” or things to with which to entertain out-of-town guests, some neighbors find those statues and flags to be visible and public reminders that white people in this country once committed treason and sedition and spent unimaginable sums of blood and treasure in an effort to retain the right to own nonwhite people as property.

Some of our neighbors are reporting that they find their continued celebration and exhibition in public places to be proof that the sin of white supremacy did not end at Appomattox Courthouse or with the Civil Rights Act or with the election of 2008, but it remains as firmly entrenched across this nation today as it ever was.

Some of our neighbors are speaking up and telling us that they don’t have the privilege of walking under the shadow of those statues and paying no attention to their meaning. And so we’re having some conversation and renegotiation signs and symbols and the shared meaning we make with them.

Whether you agree with those neighbors or not is on a certain level immaterial at this point. Because while there may indeed be “many sides” to these conversations, as I have read through Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation and back again, one thing appears very clear to me: God is *always* on the side of the people who are being oppressed. God is *always* on the side of the people who are being marginalized. God is *always* on the side of the people who are being treated as less than full human beings.

Of all people, Christians ought to understand the power behind signs and symbols. We, of all people, ought to understand that the power behind a statue isn’t in the bronze or copper, but rather power is in the meaning behind it and the ways in which that meaning is handed down from generation to generation.

If you ever get bored in worship someday, whether in this church or in any other church, I invite you to take a look around and count the number of crosses you see. Or, next time you’re

a passenger in a car, see how many crosses you can count as you drive through the streets of Fort Worth. Here in the Texas-sized buckle of the Bible belt, crosses are everywhere.

Now, in your mind's eye, replace those crosses with the hangman's noose. Quite a different picture, isn't it?

The cross was not just the Roman Empire's preferred method of executing criminals. The cross was meant to carry an unambiguous and unmistakable message. Jesus and the two bandits crucified with him weren't executed inside Pilate's headquarters in front of just a few witnesses. They were hung up on a hill outside one of the main gates of Jerusalem, so that all who entered and exited the city, men, women, and children alike, could see what becomes of those who dare to challenge the empire's power.

Atop Jesus cross Pilate, who was the standin for the empire, had written, the King of the Jews. He had it written in Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew, so that there could be no ambiguity or translation problems. The cross was a powerful symbol of domination, used intentionally by the powerful to keep the lowly in their place and to maintain the economic, political, and racial status quo.

But one Friday afternoon and into the following Sunday morning, God went and renegotiated that symbol. God took what was meant for domination and turned it into a sign of liberation. God took what was meant for death and turned it into a sign of life. God took what was meant to strike despair into human hearts and made it a sign of eternal hope. The Roman Empire has been gone from the earth for nearly 1,600 years now. But the crosses of which they were so fond now cover the globe. Such is the power of renegotiated signs and symbols.

But as always, it's not the thing itself that has the power. The power comes when we see the sign and respond to it in a mutually-agreed upon way. And so some of our neighbors may see crosses as just part of the landscape, but not really applying to them. To them, a cross may just part of the scenery when you grow up in the Bible belt. And still others of our neighbors see crosses as foolishness, as signs of a people who believe this crazy story about God who came to earth in human form and took on the Roman empire and got himself executed for his trouble, who then, they claim, rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven and will someday come again.

But for us, for you and me, for we who claim the name of Jesus Christ, the cross represents the power and wisdom of God. The cross reminds us that once a lawyer asked Jesus to name the most important commandment, to name the thing that is most important in life, to which Jesus replied, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your

mind, and all your strength. So let me invite you to put one hand in the air and make the vertical arm of a cross.

And then Jesus said, and a second commandment is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Now make the horizontal arm of the cross with your other arm.

Everytime we look at a cross, friends, we are reminded of those two commandments. We are reminded that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have a perfect example of what it is to live life perfectly aligned with God, and in perfect relationship with our neighbor.

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.

Thanks be to God!