

March 7, 2021 – 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

I was about 15 years old at the time. Sitting in the classroom of a AAA office in Akron, OH. I was in the middle of a very, very boring driver's ed class, and we were all trying desperately to stay awake as an instructor droned on about speed limits and right of way. And that's when it happened: there was a large crash and the building shook.

It woke us all up, but we didn't know what had happened until we went outside afterwards. And there we found a very practical driving lesson for all of us teenage drivers. You see an 8' delivery truck had attempted to drive under a 7 ½' canopy. And he had not only struck the canopy, but gotten his entire truck stuck underneath. Wedged tight. Like I said, it was a good lesson for us. Not just in driving, but in basic physics.

Two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Big vehicles need big openings. Big objects need big openings. And, in their own way, big egos need big openings too.

That's kinda Paul's point in our Epistle lesson for today. Big egos need big openings. We've all joked about it, I think. I can't remember how many times I've been told, "If your head gets much bigger, you're not gonna fit through the door."

All through school I was a top student in my class. I know what it means to be proud. Even arrogant at times. Humility is not something that comes naturally to me, or any other human being. At least not in our sinfulness. And some of the greatest sins ever committed in the history of the world were because of pride.

The first murder was because of pride. Cain murdering his brother over hurt pride that God had accepted Abel's sacrifice over his own. The curse of Babel was because of pride. A city so bound and determined to be the greatest ever built that they forced God himself to intervene and confuse their languages.

Even Moses was plagued by pride. God told him to go up to a rock and politely ask it to produce water for him. Moses thought that was humiliating, so he refused, struck it with his staff instead, and was punished for it by never being allowed to set foot in the promised land.

The Bible is full of pride because humanity is full of pride. In fact, I think it's fair to say that an awful lot of our sinfulness has pride at its root. Look at those ten commandments we read in our Old Testament lesson. There is no commandment against boasting. And yet, how many of them are driven by selfishness, arrogance, and pride?

We covet what we don't have because we can't accept in humility that which God has given us. We slander with false testimony those we do not like because our arrogance cannot bear to be defeated. We steal in greed because our pride always desires the power that comes from taking what someone else has.

Pride is at the root of many, even most, sins that have to do with loving our neighbor. Also known as the second table of the Law. But it also has to do with sins against the first table of the law. Loving the Lord our God.

Because when we put any god before God – when we make anything an idol over him – we're really putting ourselves over Him. Because, as St Paul tells us in the book of Romans, all idols are made in human image. All false gods are a reflection of ourselves.

Which means there is nothing more arrogant or prideful than creating a false god in your life. Because that false god is always, in its own way, an image of you. To use Luther's language, it is an image of what you fear, love, and trust the most.

Think about it. Think about those things that you put ahead of God in your life. Can't come up with any? Well, here's a helpful exercise: think of anything that keeps you from coming to church. That keeps you from spending time in God's Word. That keeps you from training your children or grandchildren in the faith.

Maybe it's your job. Maybe it's your kids' activities. Maybe it's your rest or recreation. Maybe it's something else. If it has ever kept you away from Word and Sacrament, then those are the false gods in your life. And they're hard to fight against, because very often they are the things you are most proud of.

Pride is a truck. And the more pride you have, the bigger the truck gets. And we look at our lives and we say, "But I can drive this truck. I can maneuver it. I can make it all work."

But God's Law is a bridge. It's a low bridge. And it doesn't move. And when your pride runs into God's Law... two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Somebody will win and somebody will lose. And I'll give you a little hint at the answer: God always wins.

So what do we do about this? Because, like I said, I'm guilty of pride too. And it doesn't go away easily. In fact, it doesn't go away ever. We can shrink it a bit. Take a little of our pride off the trailer through discipline and effort. But the problem is that as soon as we've succeeded in eliminating our pride we become proud of eliminating our pride. And we pile it all right back on again.

Humanity is a sinful creature. And as St Paul tells us today, the wisdom of this world is not going to solve this problem. The wisdom of this world is the problem. Whatever that wisdom is.

It's the wisdom of this world that convinces us that the things we have pride in are things that have value. The world says that it's wise to make as much money as you can. That it's wise to enroll your kids in 15 different sports and extracurriculars. That it's wise to spend Sunday morning sleeping in or going fishing.

But I guarantee you that from God's perspective these are not wise things. These are foolish things. Because they are not in His Word. The wisdom of this world is foolishness to God. Because you cannot know God through the wisdom of the world.

What then is the wisdom of God? Is it His Law? Is it those Ten Commandments we read? If I want to cast off the wisdom of this world should I just devote myself to following every word of Scripture perfectly?

No, that won't work either. It's a good goal. But it's still foolishness. Because it's still the wisdom of the world at work. It is only our pride that makes us believe we can obey God's Law perfectly.

No, the wisdom of God is foolishness to the world. The wisdom of God seems ridiculous and worthless and impossibly easy. Because the wisdom of God is the cross. The wisdom of God is to solve the problem of our pride and arrogance and boasting by crucifying His Son for us.

The wisdom of this world is prideful. It says, "I can fix my own problems. I need to fix my own problems." And in the process, this faulty wisdom – this sinful foolishness, really – only creates more problems. But the wisdom of God says, "You can't fix your own problems. So I'll fix them for you."

Which leaves no room for pride. No room for boasting. No room for any of the things the wisdom of this world wants to achieve. It doesn't even leave enough room for us to say, "God, please help me." Because even then we could take pride in the fact that we asked.

No, the wisdom of God is for Him to say, "It is finished. It's done. You can't stop it. You can reject it, if you like. You can take back all your pride and be proud of yourself for doing so. But you can't save yourself. Because I already saved you."

The wisdom of God is to take anyone, rich or poor, intelligent or stupid, young or old, male or female, sinner or saint... and simply save them. Simply send his Son to become for us the wisdom of God, in all of its righteousness, holiness, and redemption. It's as if God scooped us up out of that truck that couldn't fit under the bridge of His Law and plopped us down in the passenger seat next to His Son. Who will drive us clear into eternity.

So you don't need to lighten the load. God has already taken you where you need to go. But at the same time, you gotta admit: it's kinda foolish to hold on in pride to a bunch of things that you can't take with you anyway. In the end, whether it's the end of our lives or the end of the world, there's only one thing we can boast in: that Jesus Christ died for me. Amen.