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Fools for Christ's Sake

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Text: 1 Corinthians 3:16 - 4:13

Credibility and credentials: these are things about us that make us “believable.” Credibility and credentials have become the new buzzwords in our materialist culture. Not only do we hear about “credibility” in the various news media in terms of public figures such as politicians and celebrities, we are all forced at different times in our lives to establish and defend our credibility and credentials in order to survive and thrive.

Think of it. How many of us seeking employment have faced the struggle to write a resume that sells us well without seeming to be overdone? How many of us have sat through job interviews in which we have had to make ourselves seem believable and to be the best qualified candidate? We have to provide references for employers, schools, volunteer organizations, all to vet our credentials and establish our credibility. Even in common social conversation we are subtly vetted by others: “What do you do?” and “Where did you go to school?” are often questions we ask others in order to place them in our social “pecking order” so we know where we stand in relation to them.

And how easily can one’s credibility be damaged by gossip or an error in judgment! Many of us, if not most of us, have at various times in our lives been hurt by lies told about us that damage our reputations, or have suffered when minor mistakes have been blown out of proportion by family and friends.

Our society is jaded and cynical, believing that most people are ignorant and dishonest; and yet it demands established credibility and credentials of everyone. Even so-called “un-skilled labour” positions often require a Grade Twelve diploma and references for experience. In our relationships at work, at home, at play, and at church we are always slightly suspicious of those around us, wondering just what we can believe about others. We fear being fooled, or being made to look like fools. Trust is hard-earned and easily lost, and a soiled reputation can haunt one for a long time.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was constantly challenged by those around him concerning his credibility and credentials. Some chose to believe him and in him, yet he was arrested and executed because his message seemed incredible and his credentials were rejected as falsely claimed, illegitimate, and blasphemous. His exoneration in the Resurrection strengthens our faith in his person and message, although the continuation of his ministry has always met with scoffing, rejection, and hostility wherever his messengers of the Gospel have journeyed and sojourned in their work for the establishment of his kingdom. The truth is reflected in the fact that almost all of the original twelve apostles were martyred for their ministry, as were many other early Christian messengers, including the apostle to the Gentiles, St. Paul of Tarsus.

In today's Reading from the First Letter to the Corinthians we clearly hear Paul rhetorically wrestling with the problem of credibility and credentials. The early Christians at Corinth were already showing signs of schism into sects, favouring various versions of the Gospel as presented by different apostolic preachers. In response to this divisive spirit, Paul provides an excellent definition of the apostolic ministry: "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries" (4:1). He then contends that stewards need to be "trustworthy," but argues against any "judgment" of his own credibility and credentials by the Corinthian community.

Paul's argument is part of a larger ecclesiology (or understanding of the church) as "God's temple" in the body of the crucified Christ, which is "foolishness to the Greeks" and a stumbling-block to faithful Jews. In the culture of the ancient world, crucifixion was the lowest form of execution, reserved for the worst sort of criminals. The thought of a crucified Lord was simply preposterous: Jesus' death by crucifixion destroyed his credibility in the eyes of the world. In the eyes of God, though, the crucified Christ is the resurrected Lord. So "the wisdom of the world"—that which seems believable by our material standards—"is foolishness with God." For Paul, the apostles' credibility is established by the very folly of their appearance to the world: the apostles are "spectacles" and "fools for Christ's sake."

It is interesting how this upside-down version of credibility has played itself out in the history of the church. In general, the closer the church has worked with the world, the more we have applied worldly understandings of credibility and credentials to Christians, especially—but not exclusively—clergy. Do we not prefer our pastors to be well-

educated, intelligent, good-looking, apparently honest and morally upright in the eyes of the community? Do we not prefer to have powerful professionals and business people on our parish councils rather than those "less qualified" in terms of formal education and lacking the prestige of careers?

This churchly concern with worldly values is nothing new; yet, as in the early church, there has always been resistance to this way of thought. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, for example, the ascetic tradition of monastics has found its highest expression in the "fools for Christ's sake." These are people who feign mental illness and bizarre behaviour, tolerating abuse and scorn from the world and church, in order to witness to the radical folly and power of the cross. For it is precisely in their eccentricities and seeming silliness that they witness most powerfully that we are saved not by our credentials and credibilities but by the grace of God in the folly of the cross.

These fools still exist in our midst today. We call them "street people," "beggars," and "squeegy kids" and other not-so-nice epithets. We don't like to see them, and we certainly don't want them in our homes and churches! While many of them may be genuinely troubled, often their hearts are pure and they have a constant sense of God's presence and providential care in their subsistence level of survival. Their priorities are not ours, and so we find them eccentric and a bit frightening.

Still, being a fool for Christ's sake is not limited to the more extreme examples of the ascetics. Though we fear being made to look foolish and try to avoid it, often our humility is strengthened when that happens, as we realize afresh that not our credentials and credibilities but Christ alone can save us. I think of a young deacon who was assigned several years ago to serve a parish in upstate New York in preparation for ordination to the priesthood. One day he received a telephone call from his bishop, who was also the acting pastor of the parish. The bishop asked him to visit Mrs. Kowalsky, an elderly shut-in parishioner. The deacon was delighted at this new task, rejoicing in his bishop's trust in his abilities as a pastoral visitor. The deacon telephoned Mrs. Kowalsky and made an appointment to see her that afternoon for tea. When he arrived, she invited him into her parlor and he sat down on an overstuffed and rather lumpy armchair. They spent about an hour in conversation over tea and biscuits, discussing family and friends in days gone by. Late in the conversation the deacon asked to use the

restroom while Mrs. Kowalsky went to the kitchen to fetch more tea. Before he was able to struggle out of the lumpy old armchair, he heard Mrs. Kowalsky calling out in her whispery accented voice, "Cuddles! Cuddles! Oh, where are you, you little one? Cuddles!" He spoke to her from the parlor, "Mrs. Kowalsky, what are you looking for?" She replied, "My little dog, Cuddles. He is not here and I am worried about him. Cuddles!" At that moment the deacon got to his feet, and looked behind him. He froze as he looked at the armchair seat, wondering what he was seeing. A horrible thought began to dawn in his mind. A white, fluffy lump lay crushed on the seat. Nervously he called out, "Mrs. Kowalsky, what kind of dog is your Cuddles?" She answered, "Oh, Father, he is just a little teacup poodle. Just tiny and white." The deacon knew, with dread and shame, that he had sat upon poor Cuddles. Frightened and unsure about what to do next, he grabbed the poor creature's earthly remains and quickly put them in his briefcase.

As soon as he could he excused himself and drove back to the parish church in a daze of guilt and disbelief. His first parish visit, something for which he had prepared long and hard, had ended in disaster! He promptly called the bishop, not telling him anything but that he should come at once to the church because an emergency had arisen. That afternoon a strange little procession occurred in the churchyard; a bishop, a deacon, and the caretaker laid little Cuddles to rest. The parish bought Mrs. Kowalsky a new dog, as she had decided Cuddles must have escaped when the deacon came to the door. The deacon felt an utter fool, and has ever since checked every chair before sitting down.

Each of us finds times in our lives when we are fools. We are fools for Christ's sake in our dependence upon the wisdom of the Gospel message in our lives. Our credibility and credentials, however impressive or however humble, do not save us; it is God's love and grace for each one of us, even at the height of folly, that bring us home.

Jesus was the Son of God, and likely made his living as a carpenter or stonemason. Paul was a great teacher and founder of churches, but also made tents to pay the bills. Both were executed for their faithfulness, and both were exonerated by God in that same faithfulness. God's grace comes as an unexpected gift. Often when we are humbled and feel the most foolish we are closest to sensing Christ's presence in our lives.

So, fear, not folly. Embrace the silliness and wonder of being God's beloved creatures in a silly and wonderful world! Such is our calling in Christ: to believe in him even when the world does not; to be wise in his truth when all think us fools. "Then each one will receive commendation from God."