

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Epiphany 4 / Christian Education Sunday
February 2, 2020
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
The heart of wisdom

—1 Corinthians 1:26-31

There are a lot of smart people in this world. Thank God it is so! We live in a world that swims in the blessings of knowledge, of science, of research, of medicine, technology—the fruits of the labors of millions of gifted human beings who have devoted their talents to discovering and figuring out new things, things that make our lives better. We enjoy advances in communication, we have greater access to information, we enjoy advances in health and medicine. We are surrounded by remarkably talented people, musicians, composers, artists, authors, producers, who bring their creations to literature, to the stage, and to the screen. All these smarts, all these talents, are gifts from Almighty God, bestowed by the Creator upon his creation. Our lives are enriched by them. We benefit from them. We can be thankful for the smart, creative, talented people who surround us and do so many things, invent so many things, give us so many things that enrich our lives.

But there's a difference between smart and wise. Smart, talented, creative—those are gifts for this life, and then they're gone. Have you ever watched a virtuoso piano player, whose fingers fly up and down the keyboard? On top of natural talent, do you know how many hours and years of diligent practice it takes to achieve that kind of level of accomplishment? And yet the day will come when those fingers will be still in death. Listen to a Beethoven symphony and think of the accomplishments of such a composer. Yet now his work is but a memory and his creative juices flow no more. Or the brilliant Mozart who departed this life at age 34. Or think of the mathematical genius of Einstein and all he brought to human achievement. Today the neurons of Einstein's brain fire no more. Smart, talented, creative—they all come to an end. Wisdom lasts to eternity.

Today we celebrate Christian Education Sunday, and we celebrate the gift of Christian Education here at Emmanuel Lutheran Church. From its very beginning our congregation has been about Christian education. From its earliest days God's people here have gathered around God's Word to grow and learn in Bible classes. We have Sunday school and Vacation Bible School and youth Bible study, so that children and adults can learn and grow in their knowledge of our Savior. In the early 1970s our congregation opened its Christian elementary school, and our school has grown and prospered since those early days. Our Christian education program here at church is much more than our elementary school, but let's zoom in a little bit on our Lutheran elementary school and preschool. Our grade school offers a high-quality academic environment. We have small classes and a low ratio of teachers to schools. Our children perform with excellence on standardized tests. We have strong extracurricular programs, competitive sports teams, we teach kids music, art and drama. But those aren't the things that make Emmanuel Lutheran School and Sonshine preschool great. The best thing about our education program is that it is *Christian* education. Jesus is here. Our whole purpose is not just to fill children's heads with knowledge. It's not just to take smart kids and make them smarter. Our goal is to give them a heart of wisdom, to make them *wise* for salvation in Jesus Christ.

Think about how you came to know Jesus. Did your parents teach you about your Savior, teach you to pray? Did a friend or neighbor tell you about Jesus and invite you to church? Did you learn from Christian teachers and pastors? The Lord used someone to tell you about the gift of forgiveness and eternal life that are only found in Jesus, and in his great mercy the Holy Spirit used his message to bring you to repent of your sins and trust in Jesus. Whatever your path was to Jesus, I know this: God did not call you to become a Christian because you are so important and influential. God did not call you to be a Christian because of your perfect SAT score. It wasn't because you had great trade skills. It wasn't because you had financial acumen. It wasn't because of your noble parentage, your long, blue-blooded genealogy descended from royalty. You came to know Jesus, and you came to trust in Jesus because of God's grace. He chose you. Why? Just because of his grace and mercy. And in calling you to know Christ he revealed to you things that to people who are rich and powerful and influential and smart in the things of this world seem foolish. But to us who are being saved they are the power of God and wisdom from God.

It's the greatest paradox that God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. Science and technology have done some wonderful things for our society. The capacity of human knowledge continues to grow exponentially, enabling us to cure diseases, extend the human lifespan, explore space, develop new devices to make life easier, enhance communication and travel. We are so thankful for human discoveries and all the blessings they bring to our lives, and we benefit from them every day. But there are some things that science and discovery cannot prove. Science cannot prove the existence of God; it cannot disprove the existence of God. God is outside the realm of science. God is not discoverable or measurable or testable.

But we can know about God, who he is and what he's done for us. We learn of the almighty, infinite God in a very lowly, down-to-earth, counterintuitive way: He tells us! In his holy revelation to human beings, Holy Scripture, God tells us that he created us, that we sinned against him and earned his punishment, and that he himself became a man to take our place and save us. Sadly, because of our darkened human reason and depraved sinful nature, these things seem foolish to the world. The world wants to praise the virtue and the accomplishments of humanity; but God tells us something that seems foolish to our natural human ears. He tells us that we are naturally not good. We are naturally depraved, selfish, self-serving rebels, enemies of God, who have defied God and brought his wrath against us. We don't want to hear that harsh reality about ourselves; it sounds foolish to our natural selves and to the natural world. We human beings want to save ourselves and make ourselves acceptable to God. We want to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, demonstrate how good we can be, earn God's love and approval, and show him what we can do. It sounds foolish to our natural ears when we're told we cannot earn our way into God's good graces or impress him with our virtue or buy him off with our philanthropy. God tells us that he has done everything to save us by taking on our human flesh, keeping his own law, and dying a tormented death on a Roman cross. But that sounds like foolishness. Why would Almighty God set aside his power and take the form of a servant and humble himself and become obedient to death, even death on a cross? Why would God's greatest act of love and grace toward sinners be put on display in the agonizing death of his Son Jesus Christ? How could the greatest act of universal salvation be hidden behind a humble curtain of torture, shame and scorn? Paul says earlier in 1 Corinthians, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18).

The world's way of salvation, the way of natural humanity, natural religion, natural philosophy sounds very wise, very plausible. Contrasted with the horrible death of Jesus in blood and shame and pain we have all the goodness, generosity and charity of the Pharisees who took great pains to obey the Law of God. God says that all their righteous acts count for nothing, while the shameful death of his Son means everything. That sounds like foolishness to the world around us. The whole idea that the only way to experience God's grace and favor is to despair completely of myself and all I've done, to recognize that I have nothing to offer but sin and stand under a death sentence, and to fall on my knees in repentance before the throne of God begging and pleading for his mercy, trusting completely in the merit, life, death and resurrection of his Son, and that's the only place I can find God's forgiveness—that seems like foolishness to the world around us. *He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.*

These things are not naturally understood. To the sinful mind these things are foolishness. They are the "mora" of the world. The only way we can understand them is if God opens our hearts and gives us a heart of wisdom. When the call to repent of our sins touches our hearts, and the good news of God's forgiveness in Jesus opens our eyes, all of a sudden we see things as they really are. The cross of Jesus Christ is not the bitter end of a fool's errand and a foolish cause; it is life, healing, forgiveness and salvation! The death of Jesus when he laid down his life is not the shameful end of a great teacher and his movement; it is the sacrificial payment of the Lamb of God for the sin of the world. The resurrection of Jesus is not a fanciful, foolish legend or a tall tale; it is the very real victory of a very real and living Savior who came back from death to give resurrection and eternal life to everyone who believes in him—and eternal damnation to everyone who rejects him. The Spirit has called you. He has not only made you smart. He has opened your eyes and your heart and made you wise for salvation in Jesus Christ your Savior.

This is why we celebrate Christian education today. When we listen to God's Word in worship and Bible class we are taught by Jesus. When we send our kids to Sunday school they are taught by Jesus. That's why we operate Emmanuel Lutheran School. We want our children to sit at Jesus' feet every day, in an environment where every subject is taught from a Christian worldview, where they learn not just good and wholesome things that will make them smart and get them successfully through this life, but where they learn the One Thing Needful, where they get to know our Savior and gain a heart of wisdom. Amen.