

(choir singing)

(triumphant organ music)

- May we continue our worship by entering into the spirit of confession together. God, our Father, we confess that despite our Sunday morning affirmations of love, our ascent to the Lordship of the Christ and our stated allegiance to His church, we worship most often at the altars of the gods of power, security, affluence and social status. We condone violence in its many faces by our silence, ignorance and unconcern. We fight the rising cost of meat by boycotts and public rhetoric, and remain silent in the face of oppression and brutalization of our neighbors from Durham to Cape Town. We recognize that we are an offense against the law of love, that we and our individual and corporate actions crucify our Lord daily and perpetrate crimes against humanity in the name of Christ. We rely on your divine patience. We seek infinite second chances. We expect and demand forgiveness in the midst of our conscious and continuing sinfulness. Our Father, through the ministry and transforming power of your Spirit, may this be the day and hour that we respond to your open invitation in Christ to walk in His way to thy glory. Amen. The words of assurance are these. If we confess our sins to Him, He can be depended on to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. Now, may we join in reciting the prayer of our Lord. Let us pray. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. (light organ music) (coughing) (choir singing) The Lord be with you.

- And with your spirit.

- Let us pray. God of creation, God of love, recognizing our weakness and our helplessness to heal ourselves, protect us from the powers of this world, which corrupt the body as well as the mind and spirit. Transform the areas of our lives already twisted. Grant us the power to accept our freedom and embrace your forgiveness, in the name of Him who lives and reigns in spite of us. Amen.

- The scripture lessons for this morning are from 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 and the Gospel according to John 8:46-59. "For the word of the cross is folly 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 cleverness of the clever I will thwart.' Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where's 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, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand science and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles. But, to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your call, brethren. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But, God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God

chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being may boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and our sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, let him who boasts boast of the Lord." "Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? He who is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.' The Jews answered Him, 'Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?' Jesus answered, 'I have not a demon, but I honor my Father and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory, there is one who seeks it and He will be the judge. Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.' The Jews said to Him, 'Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, as did the prophets, and you say, if anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham who died? And the prophets died. Who do you claim to be?' Jesus answered, 'If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say that He is your God, but you have not known Him. I know Him. If I said I do not know Him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know Him and I keep His word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day. He said he saw it and was glad.' The Jews then said to Him, 'You are not yet 50 years old, and have you seen Abraham?' Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.' So, they took up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple." This ends the reading of the lesson. (triumphant organ music) (choir singing)

- Let us affirm our faith. We believe in God, who has created and is creating, who has come in the true man, Jesus, to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others by His spirit. We trust Him. He calls us to be in His church, to celebrate His presence, to love and serve others, to seek justice and to resist evil, to proclaim Jesus crucified and risen, our judge and our hope. In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone, thanks be to God. Let us pray. Eternal God, our Father, creator and sustainer of all life, source of our hope, ground of our love, and conqueror of death through the gift of eternal relationship we call the Christ, we seek you in humility, but with confidence, for we know you are present to hear our prayer, that our needs are known before we ask, and that, like a good father, you will neither ignore us nor mock us. Our Father, we confess before you and in the presence of one another, that we more often than not give in to destructive and dehumanizing impulses, and that we are blinded to the needs of our brothers and sisters by the consuming passion of our own greed and self-interest. We admit that we are too much into complaining, blaming someone else, focusing on negatives, aiming too low and often disliking ourselves. Teach us how to laugh at ourselves and to celebrate life. Remind us again that we are, in fact, the crown of your creation, and that all things are possible in Christ. Oh, God, in this joyous season, when the renewal of life bursts upon our senses in an explosion of colors, smells, warmth, birdsong and spring pollen, we raise our song of thanksgiving for the renewal of life, that like the offering of spring is a free gift, no strings attached. Open our senses to receive the gift of spring and our hearts to receive the gift of forgiveness. As we approach the celebration of Easter, may each one of us be transformed by the power of the truth that the resurrection is for us and in us. Our hope and our salvation. Our Father, uncloud our minds to receive the truth that the big lie is exposed, that you are for us and stand with us, that we are acceptable and individually precious and irreplaceable, that ultimately no one or no thing can defeat us because the work of salvation is finished, completed. Oh, God, we rejoice and give thanks. Almighty God, keep us this day in health of body and happiness of mind, in purity of heart and cheerfulness of spirit, in contentment with those things which are

beyond our power to change, in disease with all that lies within our responsibility and power to change and renew for the better, particularly in the area of personal relationship. In our labor, strengthen us. In our pleasure, purify and free us. In our difficulties, direct us. In our fears, encourage us. In our grief, comfort us and supply our needs according to the riches of your grace in Christ Jesus, our Lord. We would remember at this time, those who have special need in this hour. We pray for those who are strangers here this morning, and for those who long for a friend. One friend who can be trusted completely. We offer up our concern for those who are frightened by a newly discovered disease in themselves or in a loved one. For those who are weighted down by indecision or guilt. For those women who are pregnant, but not ready for motherhood. For seniors who face graduation, not sure if they're ready or capable of the beginning implied in commencement. For those who are old in years and do not want to be a burden to others or bored with their own lives. For parents who have lost touch with their children, and for children whose parents don't love them. For those whose work is unsatisfying, and those who have no work to do. Oh, God, there are many needs here, and among those listening this morning, and we have not even mentioned the personal and corporate struggles for freedom and human dignity in our larger community and throughout the world. Our Father, we ask that thou might hear these prayers we lift up this day. Receive them and us into thy care in the name of Jesus the Christ, our Lord. Amen.

- For several years now, I've heard theologians describe what they call a barrier between the pulpit and the pew, but I never thought I'd see the day when they'd actually build one. The sheer novelty of the preaching situation this morning in the Duke Chapel (clears throat) impels me to point that out. But, I suppose out of necessity, that's what it should be. Several years ago, one of the other Halls at Duke, Dr. Thor Hall, recently of the Divinity School faculty, wrote, "The contemporary preacher is confronted with intellectual, psychological, sociological, political and cultural issues, which when brought together probably form the most complicated situation that theologians ever had to face." Not quite. To that list this morning, we'd better add the paint scaffold. If I appear to be playing peek-a-boo with those of you behind the scaffold, it will be to determine your awareness of what is going on up in this end of the chapel. Now, at the risk of being somewhat redundant, but for emphasis only, permit me to recall a few verses from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, just read a few moments ago. "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. Where is the wise man? 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, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man, and the weakness of God is stronger than man. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." And then, a few words from the letter to the Ephesians. "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Walk as children of light. Grace be unto you and peace from God, our Father, and from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ." Amen. The discussion of wisdom and foolishness in the first letter to the Corinthians is not a simple matter, nor is the discussion completely terminated at the end of the chapter. Later in that epistle, St. Paul writes, "If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool, that he may become wise, for wisdom in this world is folly with God. We are fools for Christ's sake." To be honest about it, the Pauline letters are not easy

reading. In fact, down through the years, there have been those who have charged that St. Paul hopelessly complicated the simple kingdom message of Jesus by weaving a difficult theology using obscure metaphors. Some also say that St. Paul had an anti-intellectual bias in his view of human wisdom and knowledge. Let the difficulty of St. Paul's letters be frankly admitted. However, I am not certain at all that the charge of an anti-intellectual bias is valid if St. Paul is carefully read and understood in the context of his day. Some people have demanded science. Others have sought wisdom. That was the climate of the time, when St. Paul composed his letters to the infant Christian congregations scattered throughout the Mediterranean area. He lived in an age when human wisdom was extolled as the greatest virtue. Only a few hundred years separated St. Paul from the golden age of human achievement, when Plato and Aristotle flourished. They pursued wisdom, and may be the most significant wise men of all time. Plato explored the extent of human possibilities in knowledge, ethics, politics, aesthetics. While few agree today with the kind of dualism that he suggested as an explanation for the phenomena he observed, we cannot argue with the opinion of Alfred North Whitehead, that all of western philosophy is but a footnote to Plato. And Aristotle, with his many contributions to human knowledge, to logic, ethics, the sciences, mathematics, to other branches of philosophy, and in some respects to religion. He sought after human knowledge and wisdom in every area of human life. What a glorious privilege to live in this massive legacy of knowledge. And such an appreciation for wisdom was not unknown among the Hebrews, who called some of their scripture wisdom literature. The closest approach that they ever made to exploring some of the branches of philosophy. What reader of the Old Testament cannot be moved by that touching scene in which the young King Solomon, when promised any gift by the God of Israel, petitioned only for wisdom and knowledge, that he would be a just and able governor. Not necessarily a contemporary quality among aspiring statesmen. Wisdom and human knowledge are rightly extolled within the context of the Christian faith, and in the biblical tradition. They are not dismissed easily, for human knowledge measures the difference between life and existence. Let me illustrate what I mean by quoting from a book by Alan Richardson. (clearing throat) "Natural science arose in one of the score or so of the great civilizations known to Sir Arnold Toynbee, and that was the Christian civilization. Albeit a Christian civilization which had garnered the philosophy and the geometry of Greece, the astronomy of the whole ancient and medieval worlds, the arithmetic and algebra of the Indians and Arabs, as well as the religion and ethics of the Hebrews. Natural science and its offspring, technology and medicine, are the gifts of the Christian civilization to mankind." I think that St. Paul's position would be consistent with that appraisal. He merely asserts that wisdom is not enough to understand the Christian message, for the Christian message is not wisdom, but the word of the cross, and the cross is an event. Not simply the suffering and misery and death at calvary. It is a word event, which is the wisdom of God. Now, the cross may be aesthetically offensive and it may be an evidence of weakness to those who cannot apprehend its true meaning, so says Paul, but then he introduces some of the most interesting illustrations in all Christian literature. The foolishness of God, he says, is wiser than man. Now, that bothers me because I have never quite perceived God as foolish. He is presented in the Book of Job and in the parable of the householder who hires laborers all day long as a bit eccentric, but not a fool. St. Paul also asserts that the weakness of God is stronger than man. A perplexing notion if God is as omnipotent as the Bible contends. For, as St. Paul asserts the complete wisdom of God and the fact that men are redeemed in the long run, not by their wits but by the recognition of a new and awesome power in their lives, he then exhorts his readers to become fools for Christ. Not foolish or stupid. A new kind of fool, according to another definition. The kind of fool that listens to truth and then believes it. Certainly not the kind of foolishness described by H. L.

Mencken in The American Mercury in the following choice excerpts on American religion. "From Mississippi, it was reported that the Reverend William McCarty, now 96 years old, was called upon two weeks ago to preach at the funeral of a notorious sinner, a relative of Mrs. Levi Laird. The Reverend Mr. McCarty frankly preached on the sins of the deceased man, and instead of assuring the mourners that he was going to heaven, boldly stated that he would go to a much hotter place. He exhorted the younger people to live righteously, lest they go there too. The stuff that the Reverend Mr. McCarty was putting on her dead relative grew too hot for Mrs. Laird. She reached out and snatched at the preacher. When he ducked, she pursued him and finally was successful in tearing most of his clothes, smashing his hat and scratching him up so viciously that he had to see a physician. He had Mrs. Laird arrested. She was fined and sentenced to a term in the workhouse for disturbing public worship." And, from another source, "A lot of bright-colored bathing suits, decks of cards and novels were missing from Madisonville homes today. They were burned in front of the church yesterday, following a baptismal service in which 35 were baptized. The Reverend W.A. Carol, who conducted the three week revival, asked those in attendance to bring their bathing suits, cards and cheap novels. While 'I'll Never Turn Back' was being sung, the Reverend Carol set fire to them." And, a bit closer to home, former United States Senator and Governor of North Carolina, Cameron Morrison once said, "I got to be governor and lived in the executive mansion for four years, and while I was there, God gave me a good, noble woman for my wife. She has some money. She too had seen much service as a nurse and had ministered to suffering humanity. We have retired to our farm and there she fights the devil through the Presbyterian church, or whatever money is left and I get ahold of, I use to fight the devil through the Democratic Party. And, I tell her they're about the same anyway." And, finally, it was reported that the Reverend McKendree Long, who was conducting revivals here, warned tobacco chewers about their chances of salvation. "They may all go to heaven," he said, "but they will have to go to hell to expectorate, as the Lord does not allow spitting on the streets of gold." (laughing) Somebody explain it out here, will you? (laughs) In a book entitled "Church Politics", under the subheading, "There's nobody here but us Christians," theologian Keith Bridston comments upon some news items in Chicago, in which two priests were attacked by a crowd in the rectory after a mass. The trouble started when churchgoers realized there would be no observance of the feast of the epiphany. And, to cap it all off, this from America's foremost folk theologian, Archie Bunker. "It's all facts right from the very beginning. God made the world in seven days. And He made everyone the same religion, Christians. Which He named after His son, Christian. Or Christ, for short. (laughing) And, that's how it was for years. One religion, until they started splitting them up 'til all them other denominations. But, there's still only one true religion, His up there." Fools for Christ. That sounds more like the cultural foolishness and the religious notions that emanate from sources other than confessional, biblical and theological wants. Foolishness and ignorance of the worst sort is what it really is. Or at best, an example of what foolish preaching is. It saves. Impossible to identify with the Pauline exhortation, to be fools for Christ while walking as children of light. In these crazy, mixed-up days, we had better attempt some understanding of ourselves, as relating to some ultimates outside the realm of our immediate experience and even beyond the realm of wisdom. For the process of rationalization is very easy. Our refusal to acknowledge our finiteness leads to an inflated notion of our individual importance. We are often deceived with empty words. So often, the end justifies the means. The emptiness of recent experiences ought to make us all sober in the face of extreme pride. The GNP is finite. The Dow Jones is finite. The resources of this earth are finite. Is war really the only way to peace? Is conflict and confrontation the only way that wrongs can be addressed? What about Wounded Knee? Is injustice so inevitable that

justice can be known and dispensed? And, what about lies? Deceits? The perplexing presence of evil? What about Watergate? How much can we rationalize? How much can we explain away? Can we thrive forever on empty words? Man's knowledge may take him a long way in the world, and even in the universe, but it will never answer his deepest needs nor resolve his conflicts with his world and his neighbor. In the end, we are all limited. We are all finite. There are things that we can never know or explain. There are processes that we can observe, but cannot duplicate. Jesus claimed that He spoke the truth, but that it was not received as truth by those who clamored for His death, because He said that what He had to tell them was not necessarily what they wanted to hear. St. Paul made the same observation about the ability of men to recognize the truth. Men can be fooled, or they can be adventurous fools in the proper sense. It is the better part of wisdom to be able to relate knowledge in faith. For there is a relationship, even if there is not a complete identity. Knowledge can be verified or examined and tested and subjected to proof. Faith requires a risk, which borders on an adventurous spirit. A person can live with that perspective if he is willing to walk by faith. For there is no way that a man can resolve every dilemma he faces by his wits. There are answers that come through faith and belief, that require trust and confidence against the evidence of belief. Mankind still has much to learn. Knowledge can bring him from the depths of ignorance and foolishness, but he needs the kind of perspective that St. Paul states comes from God's choice to even change the things that are. Plainly, the cross is the Christian assertion that weakness can be transformed into new life. There is a wisdom that transcends our propensity to define and categorize and predict what is and what will be. Let me illustrate. Some years ago, I picked up a marvelous, little mini-book in San Francisco called "Twink." That's T-W-I-N-K. I don't have a speech impediment. It is full of whimsy and a host of illustrations about life and about the human being and his relation to ultimates. Well, maybe the fella that wrote it didn't plan it that way, but that's the way it came out. And, there is one dialogue that addresses what I have been talking about today. The wisdom of God, and man in His world. Now, I'm going to read a brief excerpt from "Twink", which is a conversation between two beings. Maybe between God and man, if you use your imagination. "'I have a piccolo garden.' 'What do you grow?' 'Piccolos!' 'What kind of seeds do you use?' 'Piccolo seeds.' 'Would you tell me how you make them?' 'No.' 'Why not?' 'That is my secret. I am going to patent piccolo gardens.' 'I will patent a flute orchard.' 'You can't.' 'Why?' 'You don't have any flute seeds.' 'I don't need them.' 'How will you grow your flutes?' 'That is my secret.'" There are some things that are not known in the certain sense of human knowledge, and these elements of faith, secrets if you please, are given to those who see themselves as adventurous pilgrims in a new age and a new world and a new life. Let us pray. Oh, God, we have learned from Christ that we don't have to be afraid of truth. We give thanks for all those men of science, who persisted in their search for truth about the world and the way it works, and for the opportunity to trace their steps. Grant us both the patience to wait for insight and persistence in experiment, that we may experience the joy of discovery and perhaps add to the knowledge at hand. Save us from overestimating our own wisdom by giving us the ability to appreciate both knowledge and faith. In the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. (light organ music) (choir singing) (light organ music) (coughing) (choir singing triumphantly) (choir singing) (light organ music) (choir singing) (triumphant organ music)

- Our Father, we offer these gifts of our money as a reasonable and significant part of our worship. May they symbolize, for each one of us, the offering of our lives into thy service in Christ's name. Amen. (light organ

music) (choir singing) (crowd chattering) (choir singing) (bell ringing) (light organ music) (crowd chattering)
(coughing) (woman shrieking) (hurried footsteps)

- I'm hungry!