

## God is Still Being Foolish

Sermon for 3 Lent 2021, Sunday, March 7th, 2021

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I have to admit that when I saw the gospel reading for today I was tempted to preach on it. In the past 12 months - the past few weeks in particular - I have felt like flipping some tables. And these were tables I was sure Jesus would flip, too.

But in a cooler moment, I was instead captured by this bit of wisdom from Paul:

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

As someone who has spent an awful lot of time trying to be wise and feeling like she knows what Jesus would want to do, I am confronted with the fact that it is very possible I am not all that wise, and even if I am, it won't get me into the mind of Christ.

There is an awful lot of similarity between our 21st century public square and the one in 1st century Corinth, the people to whom Paul was writing. In his day, in that city, there were experts who were very well spoken, celebrity influencers who used their platforms to sway public opinion on political and moral issues. And, also in that city, especially in the new churches, there were also Jewish seekers who looked to scripture and tradition for the fulfillment of divine promises of a Messiah.

These Greek opinion-makers and Jewish thinkers used the most powerful, respected tools of their time to promote TRUTH. They were wise in all the ways people can expect wisdom to be manifest. In the face of all that wisdom, Paul is asking his new churches to follow a way, a savior, that is ridiculous. Embarrassing, even.

Now, we here in the 21st century know Paul's argument better than the people of Corinth. Maybe we can claim to know it better than Paul himself! We read it and hear it much more often than they ever did. And we can look to essays and entire books to explain what Paul meant.

So what seemed like foolishness to the people of Corinth - God becoming a poor, criminal Jew who is executed by an occupying authority - we know that story is not foolish! We know it. We've grown up with people who were raised by people who knew it. What Paul is writing here - about a crucified Jesus being the true God - that is no longer foolishness to us.

So we might be tempted at this point to think we have figured this "wisdom" thing out. That we "get" God's wisdom, how God's audacious act in Christ is foolish only when compared to Greek philosophy and Jewish Messianic expectations.

And we would be wrong. God is not done being "foolish" with us.

The early church was planted in communities of seekers and thinkers. There were devout scholars who looked for truth in patterns of prophecy and scripture. There were philosophers who looked for truth through research and theories. They were looking for fulfillment of promises and rationales, using wisdom to understand BEING. And yet, God found a way to BE that was utterly unimaginable in those frameworks.

And so it is in our day. The way God comes to us, the way we will see Jesus in the 21st century is not going to be any more expected than it was in the 1st. Even today, Jesus interrupts our patterns, calls our attention to something new.

We humans have this tendency to use our wisdom to make the world seem right. Yet God has a way of turning things upside-down for us. You want a Davidic King? I'm sending you a poor carpenter. You want your religion and your humanity honored? You are going to follow a guy from a bad neighborhood who hangs out with all the wrong people.

In 21st Century America, it is hard for us to imagine how upside-down this is. We can try, but the fact is that no matter what brand of Christian you are in this country today, you are not in the position of those early believers.

For one thing, the cross - an instrument of humiliating death a sign of criminality and colonial power - the cross has now become a decoration for us, something we wear around our necks. For centuries - starting with Constantine - it has been used as a symbol of political and military power to oppress other people. So it can be very hard for us to imagine how embarrassing the tenets of our faith were in those early days.

How audacious it was to claim that the story and life of Jesus was truer than the words of philosophers and religious scholars. After all, it is audacious and foolish to claim that the creator of the universe became weak and vulnerable in order to make things right.

When our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry preached at his installation in 2015, he used a wonderful phrase over and over. He said:

The way of Jesus will always turn our lives and the world upside down, but we know that that's really right side up. Therein is the deepest and fondest hope for all creation and the human family.

This way of love is the way of Jesus. This is the heart of the Jesus movement. And it will turn the world, and the Church, I might add, upside down, which is really right side up.

The way of Jesus turns our lives upside-down, which is really right side up. When you put it like that, you can begin to see some of God's foolishness is still with us. We've gotten so used to things being a certain way, that when God sets things right it feels upside down. Maybe the

way to see God's wisdom in our own day is to ask where Jesus is turning the world upside-down.

Those of us alive 56 years ago today might have experienced this topsy turvy feeling. On that day, Bloody Sunday, more than 500 unarmed people tried peacefully to march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama to demonstrate for voting rights for African Americans. They were met with armed law enforcement and beaten - some of them unconscious. According to the wisdom of the world, they were weak, vulnerable, and powerless to make change. According to the foolishness of God, they were weak, vulnerable, and demonstrated the power of Love.

When those activists marched, and even when they were beaten down, the logic of the world was turned upside-down in a way that turned it right side up.

In 2019, persecuted women, men, and children from Central America marched toward what they thought was safety in the United States. Although they were unarmed and exhausted from hundreds of miles of travel by foot, they were deemed a threat and prevented from entering the country. The places where they camped became tent cities of great poverty - and also of sacrificial giving, sharing, and welcome. According to the wisdom of the world, those asylum-seeking families are weak, vulnerable, and unimportant. According to the foolishness of God, they are weak, vulnerable, and the occasion for seeing what Love looks like in action.

Where can we see God's foolishness here in Austin in 2021? Who among us is weak and vulnerable? Where would you least expect to find the creator of the universe in action?

It could be in tents under Highway 71 among people who miraculously survived sub-freezing temperatures outdoors and share all they have so that no one goes hungry.

It could be those who work in grocery stores, clinics, pharmacies, and schools who put their health on the line to keep the rest of us safe and healthy.

God's foolishness could be as mundane as a teenager helping a grandparent get a vaccine appointment because it seems like computer access is the only way to get that done.

The Christian message sounds crazy when you put it like that, that the Love that created the universe can be found in a homeless camp, or among underpaid workers, or even in overcoming technology barriers. When you feel small and weak, remember that God chose to be like you and all the rest of us,

When you put it like that, it feels like the tables are flipped - but maybe that is how the tables are also set right. God is still teaching us the wisdom of Love in the most vulnerable, unlikely, and foolish places.

AMEN.