

This Is Foolishness!!

Genesis 18:1-15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

September 9, 2018

William J. Ingersoll

First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, Illinois

In my first interim pastorate, we faced quite a challenge. We were trying to merge two churches of different denominations, different socio-economic groups, and different theological views. On a crisp fall day, a member from one of those churches walked into my office and said:

“Pastor Bill, this is foolishness, absolute foolishness,”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, understand, the folks at the other church are the friendliest, most welcoming people I’ve ever met. But I just don’t understand why we’re coming together with them. We’re so different plus their budget seems as tight as ours and their roof is leaking just like ours. And I don’t know about their order of worship. I don’t like it.”

What’s a pastor to say?

As I recall, I answered with words something like this: “Yes, my friend, I think you’re absolutely right. This *is* absolute foolishness but that is *exactly* why we *should* be doing this - because it *is* foolishness.

After all, look at today’s second Scripture lesson I just read. The Apostle Paul says that the gospel is *foolish* in the eyes of the world but that “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom...”

Let’s face it. The task of any Christian church does appear to be foolish. The task of the church is to announce the gift of a savior to a world with people who often feel no need to be saved. “I’m fine, thanks,” people say. “Sin, oh, I don’t always do what I should but I’m okay.” The church’s task is to proclaim faith in the resurrection to a world where doubt rules the day. The church holds forth the truth that love is stronger than hate and peace more

powerful than war on a planet torn by war and hatred, to assert that in a sometimes hellish world like ours, a heavenly kingdom is dawning.

As the minister Jon Walton notes, “A doctor goes into a sickroom armed with a stethoscope and a prescription pad. A lawyer has her brief and her knowledge at the ready. The plumber takes a toolbox to repair the broken pipe. But the Christian has only faith and a prayer, and, as the world measures things, that is to be absurdly disarmed.”

Yes, Paul knew exactly what we are talking about when he wrote to the Corinthians, “I did not come to you proclaiming the gospel in lofty words or wisdom . . . for the message about 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). Paul is saying that the central issue of the Christian life is the cross, a cross that seems absurd to the world but that is the focus of a Christ-centered life. Whatever Christians have to say that is distinct in the world is said because of the cross.

By the cross Paul means, of course, the place where Jesus suffered and died. But the cross is also a symbol of that place where God intervenes, where things get turned around. “There in the cross” points out Jon Walton, “what was once a symbol of death has become a symbol of life. What was once a place of suffering has become a place of healing. What appeared to be a place where evil triumphed, good overcame. There foolishness is wisdom, and wisdom foolishness. But then, of course, this is nonsense as the world judges things.”

Paul was writing to a sophisticated group of people in Corinth, Jews and Greeks, enlightened people. They were exposed to the best of thinking. Intellectual inquiry was sought after, rational thought rewarded. The Jews of

Corinth, for instance, relied on the law and the prophets as background to their understanding of how God relates to human beings. They had trouble wrapping their heads around the idea that God had taken human form. God was distant, holy, mysterious, and unapproachable. It was a stumbling block to the Jews that a Messiah who they thought was to defeat the hated Romans, would suffer and die on a cross at the hands of the Romans. The Greeks had even more trouble understanding the Christian belief that a god could suffer and die on a cross. How could an omnipotent being limit itself and enter into human experience, especially suffering? It was a contradiction in terms, a god become human. Nonsense! So they said.

Friends, God's ways have often been regarded as foolish nonsense but God always seems to have the last laugh. It begins way back in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, in the story of Abraham and Sarah.

The couple has no children, absolutely none, no kids, and they're old, very old, over 90. And a messenger of God comes to their tent one day and says, "You're going to have children. You'll conceive and have a son, and from him will come a nation, and that nation will bless the world." Sarah laughed and said, "You've got to be kidding." As the minister Frederick Buechner says, "Who can blame her! She's just been told she's going to have a baby in the geriatric ward and Medicare's picking up the tab! She had the son, and she named him Isaac, "laughter", [that's what the word means in the Hebrew, "He who laughs"] because it seemed so funny to her." Can't you see Sarah at the Women's Wednesday Morning Bible Study! Usually they're reading from their favorite Scripture translation and talking about the Sabbath sermon texts. But now here's Sarah with the bassinet, her friends are

jockeying for turns to hold the baby, and they are laughing with Sarah at the ability of God to work wonders.

And from Isaac came the nation we call Israel, and Israel, in spite of being enslaved, persecuted, exiled, and made fun of, has given the world the basis for a moral and ethical society. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your mind and heart and soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18) That’s the foundation. And from those two great commands in the Hebrew Scripture came the Ten Commandments. And in those commandments we have the basis for how best to live together. And it started when a messenger said to an old couple, “You’re going to have a baby . . . for is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” And God joins Abraham and Sarah in their laughter. It’s foolishness!

But what do *we* believe? Unfortunately, we Christians often believe what hardnosed people of the world say they believe. “The world’s slogans say it all: The one who dies with the most toys wins. Might makes right. You earn what you get; you get what you pay for. If you don’t look out for number one, no one will. Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing. In all of this we are the final arbiters of truth. We believe what makes sense to us...and most of it is pretty self-serving. That’s wise,” as the *world* sees it.

“Put that kind of wisdom, the wisdom of the world, up against the wisdom of the cross, where things get reversed, and the comparison *is* absurd. The man of the cross, Jesus, tells us how things look from there. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, he said, turn the other check also. If anyone takes your coat, give your cloak as well. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. And judge not that you be not judged. Nonsense!” [Jon Walton]

Yes, you boil it down to the basics, and there is finally nothing in a Christ centered life that commends itself to the world's wisdom. Paul had it right. The cross is foolishness to those who are involved in this world; it makes no sense: a God who takes human form and dies for the sake of the world, a cross where death becomes life and suffering healing, an ethic of doing good to those who hate you, of weakness becoming strength. This is foolishness in the world's view, but it is also, my friends, *the power of God*.

In fact, you as a church demonstrate this very thing. Today's Festival Sunday is a good example. What a wonderful idea but this idea was conceived during an interim period, often regarded as a weak time in the life of any church.

More remarkable, you are beginning a 1.5 million dollar capital campaign in the midst of this interim time- understand, churches and other non-profits just don't do that!- start a major campaign in a time of transition. Foolishness! But to publicize this campaign, one lay leader says it well - "I believe it is time to make a statement that First Pres is not idling through an interim period. We are moving forward...to an exciting future. The new entryway project we are initiating is a visible sign to support that statement." Even more amazing, 1.3 million dollars has already been raised or pledged in lead gifts alone. And shortly, all of you in the congregation will be invited to contribute. This campaign idea, I'm told, has been around since the 1980s, but only now, in this interim time, this time of vulnerability, has the campaign begun and borne fruit, with the church fast approaching its goal. I understand the campaign has been named the "First Floor Renewal" campaign. That is all well and good. But I almost want to suggest it be called the "Is Anything Too

Wonderful for God?” campaign,” using this verse from our Genesis text as its name because what you’re doing, my new friends, exemplifies that verse.

You have successfully given birth to a capital funds project at a time when most would say a church is barren. Yes, what appears as foolishness is actually the power of God!

The cross is the power of God because it tells us *who* and *how* God is. God identifies with human suffering; God comes to us and suffers with us, and that sympathy is extraordinarily powerful. Says the theologian Douglas John Hall, “The theology of the Cross declares God is with you—Emmanuel. God is alongside your suffering. God is in the darkest place of your dark night.” In the midst of such low, vulnerable times, God’s power sees us through. In the midst of human weakness, God gives us renewed strength.

The late minister Fred Craddock provides a simple, yet insightful illustration that I’ve adapted. He reminds us that sometimes a child falls down and skins a knee or an elbow, then runs crying to mother. The mother picks up the child and says—in what is the oldest myth in the world—“Let me kiss it and make it well,” as if mother has magic saliva or something. She picks up the child, kisses the skinned place, holds the child in her lap, and all is well. Soon the child is up and running, moving forward under Mom’s watchful eye. Did her kiss make it better? No, no, of course not. It was that ten minutes in her lap. Just sit in the lap of love and see the mother crying. “Mommy,” says the child, “Why are you crying? *I’m* the one who hurt my knee.” “Because you hurt,” the mother says, “I hurt.” Friends, that does more for a child than all the bandages and all the medicine in the world, just sitting with the one who loves you.

What is the cross? Understand this is foolishness but can we dare say it this way? The cross is to sit for a few minutes in the lap of God, who hurts because you hurt. Friends, this, figuratively as a church, is what you have done for a time not so long ago. And it has been time well spent. Yet more recently, because of God's continuing invitation to you, you are getting up and are moving ahead. I look forward to sharing the journey with you, my friends, as we move into the future, under God's watchful and loving eyes. Amen.

Sources

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