

March 8 2015

Exodus 20:1-17

1 Then God spoke all these words: 2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. 7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. 8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. 12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. 13 You shall not murder. 14 You shall not commit adultery. 15 You shall not steal. 16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 17 You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Psalm 19

1 The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. 2 Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. 3 There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; 4 yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, 5 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. 6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat. 7 The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; 8 the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; 9 the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. 10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. 11 Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. 12 But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. 13 Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. 14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

18 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. 19 For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." 20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made

foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

John 2:13-22

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

Each year my alma mater, Ashland University, hosts a madrigal feast. Performed by the students in the music department, this consists of a multi-hour event where the audience eats a wonderful meal, enjoys a live play, and even joins the cast in singing centuries-old madrigal songs. Characters often developed a sort of allegiance. Some loved the royalty. Others loved the servers. My favorites, though, were the jokers, the jesters, the fools. They'd often tease a girthy king about his weight, or a vain queen about her looks. And oh how funny they were.

When we think of jesters, of court fools, we often think of them as sources of entertainment, as harmless distractions from the serious business of state. But fools in the ancient world, and even throughout much of the middle ages, actually inhabited a much more important seat in society. They were often truth-tellers who named harsh realities in hilarious ways. Much like the jesters at the madrigal feast who teased portly kings and prideful queens, ancient fools would utilize their comedy in order to highlight experiences of injustice, even if their benefactors were responsible for that injustice. They were a sort of satirical truth teller that became ridiculed for their baffling honesty. They teased out the truth, quite literally, and in so doing, risked their own

safety in order to reveal the truth about society.

Though named as fools, these jesters brought wisdom to the places where they were called, even as they baffled those in attendance.

Here in Corinthians, Paul talks about the foolishness of the cross as God's wisdom. Of course, the cross seems worlds apart from court jesters. There's nothing funny about an instrument of torture. Yet, Paul here draws on this ancient concept of fooling, of telling the truth by undercutting societal norms and baffling audiences with graphic displays. What sort of upright citizen would follow a person crucified by Rome? Would call this person Lord? Consider this person God? Believe this person rose from the dead? That sounds ridiculous.

Exactly. Exactly! That's the work of a fool. Tease the cultural expectations of your audience in order to highlight the truth you're trying to bring them. The power of God is found most intimately on the cross. It takes an inconceivably divine strength to suffer death even when you could prevent that end, but that's not the kind of power or strength recognized or honored by the world. The cross shows that the power of state executioners is impotent in the face of God's will for abundant life. The cross shows that those commonly despised or ignored by the population may just be God's agents of redemption. Those things which seem foolish to us are often the very avenues of redemption chosen by God.

This sort of dynamic, a truthful foolishness, isn't as alien as we might initially think. Jon Stewart built a career upon The Daily Show, a news-commentary program that subversively sought to bring actual political change. Many politicians initially wrote off this satirical approaches as foolish until Stewart's scathing critiques upon politicians of all parties gathered a huge following of the voting public. What seemed foolish in the eyes of the establishment was actually a very wise move from Stewart and other change agents within our culture, so wise that now these politicians embrace the medium and appear as guests, so wise that the show spun off new life in the form of The Colbert Report and The Nightly Show.

What some see as foolish is actually the wisdom of new life.

Some in the church might look at the ministry of someone like Nadia Bolz-Weber as something like foolish. This woman swears like a sailor and flaunts her tattoos, things surely uncommon in most Lutheran congregations. Yet, as a Lutheran pastor, she's painfully honest about her background and the struggles she's faced, including drug addiction and leaving the church altogether for a portion of her life. To paraphrase her own explanation, she refuses to be someone that she's not. This may all seem quite foolish to some witness, until they see that Nadia's witness actually brings Jesus to a radically different kind of community. She's welcomed people who

refused to ever enter a church again because, well, her congregation doesn't operate or feel like many of the others within the ELCA. In fact, she's grasped on to a core tenet of Lutheran theology, that we are simultaneously sinners and saints, and has gone so far to name her congregation just that, the House for All Sinners and Saints. They've gone from a little group the size of ours to a congregation that sees nearly two hundred people at weekly worship. This sounds a lot less like foolishness and a lot more like wisdom than we might initially anticipate.

There seem to be, then, two directions to go from here. First, the questions that we must ask ourselves. What seems foolish to us might actually offer a window into the work of God in the world right now.

So, what truths have we written off as foolish? What meaning have we cast aside as silly? What beauty have we scoffed at in jest? At each of these things, we must look much more closely. Rather than expecting silliness, we must anticipate our God, the God who appeared in a burning bush, the God who spoke through Balaam's ass, to be at work in unexpected ways.

Secondly, though, we must reassess the value of foolishness in ministry, in evangelism, in the growth of the church. Consider that Paul takes this theme of foolishness further in the letter to the Corinthians, where he speaks of his own identity as becoming a fool for Christ. As an evangelist, one spreading the good news of the Gospel, Paul sees his constant

persecutions and derision at the hands of authorities and even of other evangelists as an active method of ministry. Echoing his words on the cross, he tells the church at Corinth, "We are made fools for the sake of Christ, but so you are wise in Christ." In other words, for Paul the spectacle of ministry serves as a method of growth within the church.

For us, a church that wants to grow in witness and service to the New River Valley, we must consider how these things apply to us. First, that though we may seem an unlikely candidate to some, God works unpredictably through situations like ours in order to bring new life and renewed hope to the world. We may be considered foolish, but in the cross, God may make us a sign of wisdom.

Second, and no less important, we like Paul are called to be evangelists. We can no more stay silent about the work of the Gospel. No longer can we keep from speaking the name of Jesus, from giving thanks for the work of the Holy Spirit. We must take risks, and the kinds of risks that just might make us look like fools in the culture to which we minister.

Confident that God might use us, we must begin speaking the name of Jesus. When someone asks what you're thankful for, being able to honestly declare our thanks for the work of God in our lives. We must take the risk of sounding like fools, of appearing like jesters, in order to show the world the magnificent truth at the heart of our faith: that there is a God who loves us enough to risk it all, to sacrifice,

to give up life in order to save the lives of all creation. That's a message we all need, and surely it is worth appearing foolish to welcome new people into the embrace of this love.

As a church, then, we must speak this name, this truth, this love, because we want to grow. Not to meet a budget, not to feel better about ourselves, but to give the gift that we've been given: incredibly, absolutely foolish love. We become fools because of the foolish love of the cross. We risk ridicule because God took the ridicule we deserved. We share our witness because Jesus witnessed to us the goodness and generosity of the Lord. So, dear friends, let's make more friends. Let's share the name of Jesus, the name by which we are saved, the name that gives

us life, whose apparent foolishness upon the cross was wisdom for the salvation of all creation, for us, for me, and for you. Amen.