

Foolishness
Jubilee Mennonite Church
February 4, 2018

Purpose: To recall the invitation into the kingdom, even beyond the wisdom of this world.

Message: As people of kingdom commitment, we are called to the foolishness of the gospel proclaimed for all.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31[I will read], Isaiah 42:1-9 (please read)

Synopsis: We spend a lot of time trying not to appear foolish. Most of the time, we want to be sensible people with sensible ideas. We spend a lot of time and energy trying to make our world and our views make sense, our conclusions un-assailable and logical. We want to be right in the eyes of this world and by the ways of this world, and when the notions of the Gospel stretch the sensibilities of our common sense, it can be a struggle for us to understand what to do within that. Yet, as Paul confesses, the message of the cross and the way of Christ challenges the conventional wisdom on every hand. What might it mean for us to embrace the foolishness of Christ and own its true message that is far beyond our wisdom?

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Christ the Wisdom and Power of God

¹⁸ 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. 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, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ 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; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 ¹⁸

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but to us who are being saved
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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 called,
both Jews and Greeks,
Christ is 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.

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not many of you were wise according to worldly standards,
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There isn't much getting around it. Sometimes we just look foolish. Like the time I rushed out of the house early in the morning to catch a flight. I grabbed my bag, I grabbed the gear I needed, and headed out the door at an hour that I typically try very hard to never live with my eyes open if at all possible. I made it to the airport, found a parking spot, got out of the car, to the counter, checked in, into security right on time to the gate just in time to remember that I had forgotten my wallet. I left it at home on the counter. Fortunately, I had my passport in my computer bag, so I had what was required to actually board the flight. But trying to travel—make a flight, rent a car, buy yourself lunch without the plastic ways and means that we take for granted is way harder than it looks. The nice people at Hertz were having none of it, even though I could prove who I was, and that I did own a credit card—I had very nice picture of it—that wasn't good enough. Fortunately where I was going was reasonable to take a taxi to, and I was able to arrange for some cash from the guy I was meeting, and I was able to cobble together what I needed to make it through the trip, every time needing to explain to people I barely knew why it was I would be needing their help, their money to make it through. Nothing quite breaks your air of professionalism like having to lead off with “Hi I'm Bryce. I'm a bonehead.”

The art of not being revealed as a fool is the art of making sense within the way things are. We want to be cool, calm, collected, rationally working our way through the world by the most efficient means possible. The one who makes the least waves, offers the least vulnerability, and wins the most arguments wins the way within the world. We do this in our lives—we invest enormous amounts of energy into the illusion of our own composure, regardless of the truth of the matter. We also do it within our faith; even more so. Because let's face it; faith and the life it demands of us does not make rational sense by the ways of the world. There is a vast amount of painful experience to argue that Loving one's enemies is not an effective strategy for personal safety. We know way too many times where being an ethical, moral person even in the broadest sense of the word, is not the most profitable way to be. Often times we are left needing to be honest about the nature of faith being just that—stuff that is believed to be true without empirical evidence to verify its efficacy. A great deal of what doing and being church is all about seems downright foolish by the standards of the world at large. Take communion—for the uninitiated, completely unfamiliar with the meaning and symbolism of the body broken and the blood shed, this sacrament sounds like something out of a horror novel, complete with human sacrifice. We

might be insulated somewhat to it in a culture that has a broad understanding of what Christianity is all about, but the contrasts do exist. Pope John Paul II sums it up well as he compares what he offers as the values of the world, and the values of Christ in the Beattitudes. Makes for startling reading to be sure.

Now it is not my purpose to ruin a perfectly good Sunday morning with the irrationality of the gospel, nor am I setting you up for a sales pitch where I explain away the discord between what we know to be the Gospel and the world as we know it, as if I could. There are plenty of efforts to accomplish these ends; I don't see need to add to them. Rather I think we need to embrace the foolishness—right up front. Sometimes we forget how insane it is to stand up and say that it is a good idea to live by the ideals and life lessons of a man who was executed as an enemy of the state, only to rise again. Seriously, if we are looking for a way of life to market here, Christianity really could use some re-branding. Which is exactly what we do. We clean up Jesus, clean up the way of discipleship to make it less offensive for general consumption, and less demanding of us. We try to make our good news of salvation from the way of life as it is sound less foolish than what it really is.

But in doing so, we lose something very important in the process. We lose the way and meaning of the cross. We lose, I think, what Paul is on about here, and what is making him most passionate for the people he was writing to back in Corinth. We are always painting Paul as the company man, the one who sets up and supports the status quo, but that's only because that is the purpose to which he has been used over the centuries. Yet, I am not always convinced that this is really what Paul is all about, and this is one of the prime examples that can give you that feeling—Paul's letter the church at Corinth.

When Paul left Corinth, he left a church where the message was that you are all one person, all one body, all one social unit. And that was radical for this time and place. We think we have social stratification—we have nothing on Corinth and the Roman Empire. Corinth was a city which was about as worldly and decadent as they came. Sitting on two sea ports, the world was their oyster, and they had all the cosmopolitan comforts and expectations that great civilizations imply. So as this Jesus movement takes root in Corinth, it is a big departure from

what is. They are taught you are all one, you each one matter to God not by status or virtue but by grace alone. After Paul's departure it was not long before the sensibilities of this city began to seep their way into the cracks of the church and do its damage, to which Paul eventually responds with a letter, a kind of grocery list of infractions against the gospel. Christians in Corinth had begun committing immoral acts. They were suing each other and refusing to eat together at the Lord's Supper. The unity of the body was being threatened and it was up to Paul to remind them of the Kingdom wisdom into which they had been baptized. He begins this task in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 and ultimately concludes in his famous chapter on love (1 Corinthians 13). Time and again he asks them to think of others. Over and over he asks them to give up their privilege. Over and over, he invites them into all the foolishness that is the life of Christ. You cannot read chapter 12 and 13 all about the one body and the one mind, the greatness of love without knowing that this is not happening at all in the context to whom he is writing.

To the outsider, Paul insists, proclaiming Christ crucified is sheer folly (*moria* in the greek). In today's language, we might say that this message could only appeal to a group of "morons." For the Hellenes this was clearly nonsense. Ultimate truth, they argued, must necessarily rise above the flux of nature. Gods did not take on human form to be crucified and resurrected. God is a force outside the world to be worshiped, not in the world to be lived. Similarly, the Jews had their own stumbling block. For centuries they had sought from their prophets and in the heavens signs that the day of the messiah was imminent. By the first century this apocalyptic hope had taken a number of forms: the messiah would be a heavenly figure coming on the clouds; he would be a warrior king; the messiah would be a priest. Jesus of Nazareth was none of these. Indeed, he was a man cursed, as all people executed publicly are under God's curse according to the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 21:23). To proclaim this as hope and deliverance was not only foolish, it was blasphemy.¹

Within all of this, the truth of the kingdom remained, and remains still. The good news of the kingdom is hard to hear because it does not make sense to worldly ears. It takes time to learn to hear. It is not rational to love your enemies. It is not rational to be united in one body across many differences. It is not rational to speak words of peace in a world of war. It is not

¹ See 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 Commentary on Second Reading by Daniel G. Deffenbaugh, workingpreacher.org

rational to declare that God is bigger than any little box that we can put around God, any set of rules that we can enforce, or method we can prescribe. But it does contain the rationale of the kingdom, and promise of a new heaven and new earth.

We are called to be fools of the Gospel, be it in temple rants or quiet determination. We foolishly pray for those who disagree and are persecuting us. We feed our enemies, loving them as our own neighbors. We lift up the foolish cross and proclaim that what is here and present is not the whole story, and will not be the ends of our world. We insist that human relations are not defined by the politics of power and economy, but is ruled by the only superpower that there ever has been and ever will be, the Lord God, the mighty one, the creator of heaven and earth. We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick, taking the risks of the foolish not in our own wisdom, or in the wisdom of our nation, our culture, our leaders, but in the foolish wisdom of the God of all wisdom, now and forever. We become fools in the name of love, in the name of hope, in the name of Christ crucified. THAT's the invitation. That's the challenge. That's the hope.

And we can do no other. The Gospel is foolish. And we are called to be people of good news, establishing the kingdom now and forever more. So may we be fools always in the name of Christ.