

Foolishness
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
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David Lewicki, preaching
North Decatur Presbyterian Church
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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. For it is written,
“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”
Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? 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, God decided, through the foolishness of the proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews ask for signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

I want to talk for a few minutes today about foolishness...

But in order to do that, we need to define foolishness.... Can I get two helpers?

Helper 1:

Hi. I am a successful professional. I have two kids, who are both doing just great. My spouse is pretty awesome. Did I tell about the great vacation we took last summer? It was great. My great kids and my awesome spouse and I had a great time. We love coming to church because it’s nice for people to see how great we are. Overall, I would have to say that things are pretty great. I mean... I guess they’re not always great.... Never mind. We’re fine. Great.

Helper 2:

Hi, I’m... well... I’m pretty much a wreck. Truthfully, I’m not at all where I thought I’d be in life at this point. When I was little I wanted to be a dancer. I never dance. Would you like to see me dance? What I do is drink a lot of coffee. I mean, *a lot* of coffee. I drink so much coffee not because I love it but because I never sleep. I wake up at night worrying... about my life, about the world, about microplastics and public education. I spend a lot of money on coffee. Did I tell you I have a pet bird? He only says two words: “Apocalypse.” And “coffee.”

Alright. Which one is the fool?

What we see is that there are really two understandings of “fool.”

One understanding of fool is the outlier. The person whose behavior is outside the boundaries of what society has said is appropriate. The fool says things that cannot be said in “polite company.” In this sense, Helper 2 is clearly a “fool.”

But when fool exposes the the falsehoods that hold up our social conventions by calling out the lies that we tacitly accept as truth, the fool turns the tables. The fool becomes the wise one who has the inner clarity to tell the truth about the fragility of our lives. “Life is great.” *Really?* Who’s the fool?

Society has always needed fools to expose the foolishness by which we often live.

The history of fools is long. Some trace it back to the Greek philosopher Socrates. Socrates wrote nothing, had no job; he was a teacher but accepted no payment. He never washed. He was ugly. All he did all day was ask annoying questions. Socrates insisted that his wisdom was found by admitting his ignorance. The Socratic method ask relentless ignorant questions—he plays the dummy, thereby exposing the foolishness of the so-called wise ones who postured and preened around him.

Some of you, when you hear the word “fool,” think about the tradition of the court jester in medieval Europe: a juggler in a floppy hat with bells on it. But the jester was the one who could poke fun at anyone in the royal court. The jester had a license to expose pretensions.

The fool later moved out of the court and into the theaters—think about the role of fools in Shakespeare. Later, the convention would be taken up novelists who could invent all kinds of literary characters to expose truth and reveal hypocrisy. We still have fools—think Stephen Colbert.

What is less well known is that Christianity has its own tradition of holy fools. For thousands of years, we have had within the church, a steady stream of fools, dancing and darting around margins of our churches. Exposing hypocrisy, revealing truth. I’d like to introduce you to a few:

St Simeon Salus, the Holy Fool.

In the 500s, Simeon went out to the desert, where he spent 29 years living on lentils in an isolated cave next to the Dead Sea. Simeon left his cave one day and set out for the city of Emesa in Syria. Arriving at the city gate, he found a dead dog lying on a pile of garbage; he tied the dog’s leg to the rope around his waist, and entered the city dragging the canine behind him.

This was only the beginning. Simeon decided to play the fool to mock the idiocy of the world His behavior was eccentric and scandalous.

During the church services, he threw beans or nuts at the clergy and blew out the candles. In the streets, he tripped people, developed a theatrical limp, and dragged himself around on his bum. On solemn fasting days he feasted, consuming vast amounts of beans – with predictable and hilarious results. Playing the fool exposed Simeon to insults, abuse, beatings, which he endured with patience. Simeon was regarded as mentally ill, a scandal. He died and was buried in a place, where the homeless and strangers were buried.

After he died, word began to spread about the extraordinary acts of kindness and charity that Simeon had accomplished... all of them in secret. He had helped people; nurtured people; cared for them during sickness; fed them; loved them. He was a jerk; a clown; a fool; he was also a better Christian than any of the rest of them had been.

Simeon is reported to have said:

I beg you, never disregard a single soul, especially be a monk or a beggar. For Christ’s place is among the beggars. . . . [S]how love through almsgiving. For this virtue, above all, will help us on (the Day of Judgment).^[5]

Simeon’s foolishness was to make sure we never got too comfortable. We never get to thinking that Jesus is found in the reputable, the orderly.

Here's one more fool to know: Basil the Blessed. Any of you ever been to Moscow or seen the pictures? What's the famous church with the onion domes called? St. Basil's. Who is it named after? The greatest of the "holy fools," Basil the Blessed.

In the late 15th and early 16th centuries, Basil walked through the streets of Moscow barefoot in the burning summer heat and the harsh winter's frost. He would upset carts of food vendors and endure the beatings of merchants, only to discover later that the vendors were trying to sell food that had spoiled. He shoplifted and gave what he took to other poor people—a kind of Robin Hood. He threw rocks at wealthy people's houses and prayed for their conversion. His reputation grew, and people saw him as a man of God, and a denouncer of wrong. Basil walked through Moscow wearing nothing more than a long beard. Few doubted his holiness. Tsar Ivan the Terrible feared no one but Basil. Once Basil went to Ivan's palace and forced the tsar to eat raw meat during the Good Friday fast saying, "Why abstain from eating meat while at the same time you murder men?" Ivan so revered the morality of Basil, that he was afraid to let any harm come to him. When Basil died, Ivan was one of his pallbearers.

What's up with this? What's the difference between a "holy fool" and someone who's just kind of "off?" Holy fools pose an essential question: are we keeping true goodness at a distance by clinging too closely to prudence, to our social reputation, to what those around us regard as 'normal'?

The holy fools do something wonderful: *they shout out with their words and deeds that to seek God is not the same thing as seeking the world's approval.* Here's the stark truth: the Kingdom of God that Jesus came to announce is not compatible with most of what the world calls "normal." Our fear of being regarded by others as nutty or weird or controversial confine us to self-imposed cages of 'responsible' behavior. These cages limit our freedom. They limit our discipleship. They limit our ability to love each other.

And love, in the end, is the only arbiter of truth—not social convention, not even rationality. Love declares what is true, and what is good.

This is what is at the heart of Paul's statement to the Corinthians about the foolishness of the cross when compared to the so-called "wisdom of the world." God, Paul writes—and here he's quoting Isaiah, destroys the wisdom of the wise and thwarts the cleverness of the clever. Instead, God reveals God's definitive truth in the absurdity of Jesus on a Cross. A savior who is humiliated and tortured. This is the greatest evidence of God's power. God acts in solidarity with all who are tortured and oppressed by joining in our suffering all the way to death. But when Jesus is raised, God swallows death itself. Love wins—not with a conquering army and more bloodshed. With mercy. The cross, the vilest instrument of torture, becomes the symbol of the final victory of merciful love.

It is, Paul rightly observes, "foolishness." But to those who understand, the cross is the foolish wisdom and the loving power of God.

Jesus himself was a fool. The gospels report that people call him all kinds of disparaging names: "insane," "possessed," "a criminal," a "drunkard and a glutton." His life was a kind of performance art—he did and said ridiculous things that turned wisdom on its head... he made people laugh... he made people think... and he made them *different*.

- Jesus turned water into wine prolonging a party...
- He sat down in a boat in the middle of a storm and told the disciples to “calm down”
- He held the hands of lepers, spat into the eyes of blind men
- Holding a coin, he told a crowd to “render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s,” and then gesturing to the whole world... he said “and give to God what belongs to God...”
- His Beatitudes mocked acceptable standards of what is good; he insisted the meek would inherit the earth, that it was a blessing to be lost in the grief...
- His ethics were absurd: he told people to love their enemies, return evil with good; when someone takes your coat, give them your coat and your underwear, too...
- He told stories about the kingdom of God—the glorious rule of God... it was like a woman making bread that she ruins with yeast, the kingdom is like a really a big weed; the kingdom of God is like a lost coin or buried treasure
- Even in the glory of the resurrection, Jesus was comic: he appeared to disciples behind a locked door; showed up out of nowhere on the road to Emmaus; sat on the beach and ate a grilled fish
- The greatest joke of all: getting hoisted up on a cross, so that we might all find life... so that we might not fear anything—not embarrassment, or shame, or social disapproval, or punishment... or death.

The genius of God’s love in Jesus Christ is to expose our foolishness so that we can become fools for love.

Saving the world with love. Only a fool could do that.