

March 4, 2018

Third Sunday in Lent

John 2: 13-22; I Corinthians 1: 18-25

Prayer: Dear God, Please be with us in our Lenten journey, in our march toward the cross. Let us feel your presence even as we seek to emulate your suffering. We pray in the name you wore when you were here, Amen.

The Foolish Cross

Last summer Vince and I traveled for two weeks through Europe with our son, Taylor. Since Taylor lives in Warsaw, Poland, he booked all the Airbnbs.

When we got to our first stop in Berlin, the taxi driver let us off in a neighborhood that was completely covered in graffiti. We got to our little apartment, and there were eight young men smoking marijuana at the front door. They politely stepped aside to let us pass.

The apartment was on the first floor, so we were separated from these young men by, maybe, a quarter-inch of glass in a window. And they indeed, stood out there 24 hours a day.

Inside the apartment, the floors were wood, but they looked like a floor you'd find in a barn. And the bathroom looked exactly like a campground bathhouse.

I sat down on our bed, which had linens I couldn't quite figure out, and thought, "What was I thinking? Why would I trust a 32-year-old wild man to book our European vacation?"

So I plugged in my hair dryer, with its European adapter -- and it blew up anyway. It turns out that American hair dryers are the Mike Tysons of appliances.

And I thought, *Just how foolish can I be?*

In our Scripture passages today, we are going to look at a time when both Jesus and New Testament writers John and Paul were contrasting God's wisdom with human foolishness. This whole dying on the cross business was the height of human foolishness. No one would choose that.

So what was God up to? How could following someone to the cross ever be a good idea?

We're going to start with a gospel passage, so if you'd like to read along, please turn first to **John 2: 13-22**.

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables.

¹⁵Making 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. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!'

¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'¹⁸The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?'

¹⁹Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'

²⁰The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?'

²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After 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.

This, of course, is one of the most familiar stories in our gospels. It is told in all four gospels, and we know how rare that is.

This action of Jesus driving animals and money changers out of the temple caught everyone's attention.

It is commonly referred to as "the cleansing of the temple," but Jesus wasn't really cleansing anything. He was *overturning* the temple authorities as surely as he overturned the tables of the moneychangers.

He was commenting on the foolishness of the religious authorities in making this sacred place about money.

You know, sometimes it's hard to find a relationship between biblical stories and modern life, a way to preach biblical truths with contemporary relevance. But not here.

If there is a common and consistent flaw in American churches, I'd say it's right here. Money. In getting so caught up with raising money, adding gyms and fitness centers and coffee bars, courting donors, making budget -- that it overshadows everything else.

I get it. One of my primary jobs is to raise enough money to keep Triune operational. You may have noticed that we do not have a gym, or a children's program, or middle school ski trips, or Wednesday night suppers.

We have chosen, instead, to spend most of our budget on social workers, a rehab counselor, operations specialists, a restoration advocate for sexually traumatized women, a volunteer coordinator -- on frontline staff who are going to change someone's life. And funding all those positions year after year is expensive.

So I get it. I get that we have to have money to remain open.

But the minute we start making decisions based on finances, we are in trouble.

The minute we start thinking *Our donors might not like that*, we are in trouble.

The minute we start asking, *What do people want?*, we are in trouble.

Some of you may have had experiences with churches that overbuilt to attract new members, and then ended up with a debt or even maintenance they couldn't pay. Sometimes they have to lay off staff because the builder's loan and the heating and air-conditioning bills are rigid. Salaries are where they have wiggle room.

We have had a few families visit us and tell us they'd love to bring their families here all the time -- if we had a children's program. They wanted their children to see women in church leadership.

They wanted them to see women of color in church leadership -- as when Marydell preached last summer and continues to serve communion and preach at our evening service.

They wanted them to see service and inclusion go hand in hand with worship.

But they had to have that children's program. Of course, I understood that need. We raised our children in large churches with Sunday school and basketball teams and youth trips and Vacation Bible School.

And I know how important that is, for churches to raise the next generation, to pass on the faith. For children to see what Christianity looks like on the ground.

And inevitably, I thought, hmmm. More members. More offering. More money. Wouldn't that be a good thing?

But the more I thought about it, the more I was afraid the tail would come to wag the dog. Because among the homeless population are ex-felons and sex offenders and the mentally ill. Would the families eventually object to their presence in church?

I was afraid a children's program would lead to sports programs. Would lead to gym building. Would lead to chasing all sorts of things to satisfy the needs of a certain group.

Ultimately, I was afraid that by designing something to attract one group, we could lose our focus on the people we *are* serving, the people we *are* including. We could lose focus on the very thing that makes us Triune. So we declined to create a full-scale children's program.

I'm not sure it was the right decision. It was the one I made.

These church financial crises we find ourselves in are not one bit different than what faced the Sadducees who ran the temple in Jerusalem. Herod the Great and then his son took 46 years

to build that temple. Heaven knows how much upkeep it needed! Those moneychangers and sellers of cattle, sheep and doves made money for the temple.

And Jesus told them *to cut it out*. Their moneymaking had taken over the true mission of the place.

John then writes that the Jews, the religious authorities, wanted a sign. In other words, they wanted to know by what authority Jesus challenged their temple marketplace.

John, and John's Jesus, were always speaking on two levels, one literal, one metaphorical. So Jesus answered in what amounted to a riddle: **“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”**

His adversaries knew the temple of stone had taken 46 years to build. Understandably, they didn't understand his message – that he was speaking of the temple of his body.

He was the new temple, the word made flesh, the new place where God was dwelling. He was speaking of his upcoming death on the cross and resurrection.

We talk sometimes about the Bible being in conversation with itself. That is, we see echoes of certain words or phrases or ideas cropping up in multiple places.

And so we see Paul using this same language of the Jews *seeking signs* when he writes to the Corinthians. To non-believers, he writes, the truth will appear as foolish as Jesus's words once appeared to the temple authorities.

Please turn to **I 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. ¹⁹For it is written,

'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'

²⁰Where 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? ²¹For 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, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

²⁵For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Paul had as much trouble with the Corinthians as Jesus had with the Sadducees.

The church at Corinth was a major church in a major city. After Paul founded it and moved on, he heard about dysfunction in the church body -- rival groups fighting for control, flagrant immorality, disregard for teaching Christian behavior, marginalizing the poor.

Some of the Corinthians even thought they had special gifts that made them more spiritual, more knowledgeable, more wise.

So Paul wrote this letter to straighten them out. And in this very first chapter, he knocks down any notion that they – or we – can earn our way into the kingdom through our spirituality or knowledge or wisdom. That is simply not the entry point.

Verses 22-24 are among my favorite in all Scripture because they address this counter-intuitive wisdom of living out the gospel.

The Jews wanted miraculous signs, Paul says. The Gentiles wanted sophisticated arguments.

“But we proclaim Christ crucified, (which is understandably) a stumbling block to the 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.”

Both the Jews and the Greeks – in other words, everyone – were and are called to Jesus’s message. Everyone has the opportunity to hear and accept. But there will be some who find the reality of a Christ crucified a stumbling block. They will find it foolish.

A criminal executed by the Roman Empire in the most hideous way possible – that’s who we follow? That’s the foolishness of the cross.

But to those who believe, it makes sense – even if it’s counter-intuitive sense. Our Lord died for his enemies. Our Lord submitted to death for his enemies. As opposed to killing them – which is what was done to enemies before he came.

That is wise in ways human foolishness cannot fathom, though we have seen subsequent glimpses in people from Gandhi to Martin Luther King to Nelson Mandela.

Meanwhile, back in Berlin, after three days we grew quite fond of our little hovel. It had a kitchen about the size of this pulpit. But that kitchen an electric water kettle and coffee and a French press – all the comforts of Starbucks.

We spoke to the weed smokers at the door, and realized no one was going to break in as long as they were hanging around.

Then we went to on to Dresden. The Airbnb Taylor had booked was a lovely apartment with a balcony overlooking a courtyard where we ate croissants from the bakery downstairs.

Then Prague with an even lovelier apartment with 14-foot ceilings.

Then Krakow with an apartment so incredible that I thought about moving there permanently. And every single one had a working hair dryer.

It turned out that traveling with a 32-year-old wild man was just fine.

What I thought was foolish was pretty darned wise.

Today is the third Sunday of Lent. We are smack in the middle of the season when we march to the cross to witness Jesus's trial and crucifixion.

I cannot tell you why God chose such a strange notion as his method for salvation.

I cannot tell you why dying on a cross seemed like a good idea.

This is part of Paul's seeing "in a mirror dimly." Knowing "only in part." (I Cor. 13: 12)

Here's what I *can* tell you: The walk to the cross had to do with an overpowering love for us.

A love so overwhelming that it looks like sheer foolishness to those who don't accept it.

Amen.