

“Such Foolishness”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Lent, Sunday, March 4, 2018
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25 John 2: 13-22

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

Such Foolishness

A friend once described her church
to someone who had never been there before.
“You will know you are in my church when you get there

*if the people are friendly,
the worship services are meaningful and fulfilling,
and on top of the building there's a giant plus sign."*

In the Light and in the sight of God we gather as one people
to stand in the shadow of that plus sign.
Our denominational symbol of the red Chalice with St. Andrew's Cross
was explained to me this way:
Imagine you are holding the Cup of our Lord from the Last Supper,
and the Cross is right behind you.
You find that you are standing in its shadow for the Sun oversees all.
The shadow of Christ's Cross falls across the Chalice in your hands.
Every time you see the symbol of the Cross on the Chalice,
remember God loves you.

We gather as one people to stand in the shadow of the Cross.
What is really dying on the Cross in our souls?
Our egos; our selfishness; our self-centeredness; our me-myself-and-I-ness.
When we die with Christ, we rise with Christ.
We rise as a new creation in Christ.

What is being born anew and afresh in us?
A new creation in Christ, restored, reoriented, reinvigorated.
A selfless, other-centered new being
giving thanks that God's love is for all people, and that all means all.

Paul wrote to the people of Galatia:
*"But far be it from me to glory
except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,
by which the world has been crucified to me,
and I to the world."*

Such Foolishness

"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,"
said the Apostle Paul,
"but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (I Cor. 1: 18)

Theologia Crucis is Latin for the theology of the cross,
a belief born of experience
that God's love is realized in Jesus Christ,
who was sacrificed on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins
and to bless us with life everlasting.

To the world, writes Paul, the meaning of the cross is utter foolishness.
What kind of deity would sacrifice a holy child for the sake of humanity?

Yet to any who are grateful and in awe of such a love,
the Cross represents the power that saved us and is saving us still.
Come, fools for Christ, preaches Paul, let's gather in the shadow of the cross;
here we remember how much God loves and blesses us
with the gift of forgiving grace.

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

This is Good News!

Rest assured that in the name of Jesus Christ
you are forgiven of your confessed sins,
and in Him find hope, healing and everlasting hospitality.

More Good News!

We have direct access, equal access, full access to God the Creator.

*"Christ brought us together through his death on the cross.
The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility.
Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders.
He treated us as equals, and so made us equals.
Through him we both share the same Spirit
and have equal access to the [Creator]." --Ephesians 2:16-18 (The Message)*
*"In whom we have access to God
in boldness and confidence through faith in him." --Ephesians 3:12 (NRSV)*

Such Foolishness

During my early formative years—not to say that these years are any less formative—
I listened to music from a variety of music stations—which I still do.
Rock, Top 40, Soul, Latin, Classic, Jazz, I listened to whatever caught my attention
while flipping through radio stations and grooving in my home in the evenings.
On Sunday evenings, during commercial breaks on music stations,
I tuned the dial to local preachers.
One of my favorites was Rev. Ike.
Maryellen Merrill and I have shared how we heard the same preaching on the radio.
Maryellen and I lived maybe five blocks apart in NYC,
knew some of the same families in East Harlem,
including folks in my home Church of the Living Hope,
yet we never met each other until Minnie Dozier Haynes
invited Maryellen here to FCC Decatur.

It's good to be in Christ's Church!
So, back to Rev. Ike: he could bring it.
He had a golden voice and enough energy to light the sun.
His slogan was: *"You can't lose with the stuff I use!"*
His stewardship pitch was to sell prayer cards at \$10 each,

which is \$46.07 in 2018 dollars.

"Just mail \$10 now,

and we'll send you a prayer card sure to generate an answer to your prayers."

And then came my favorite part, the testimonials, as different voices spoke up.

"Yes, sir, I sent Rev. Ike my \$10, and when I got my prayer card,

I prayed for a new car.

In the morning, there in my driveway was a brand-new Cadillac!"

I laughed out loud,

a 15-year-old secure in his faith that this is not how God works.

I perceived that Rev. Ike was a shyster, a scam artist,

a silky-smooth wolf cloaked in lamb's wool and church language.

Such Foolishness

My Bible tells me I don't need a card or token or dove

to commune with the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

We have direct access to God.

Nothing and nobody can come between you and the love of God.

You don't need me to talk with God.

You don't need the Church to have access to Christ.

You don't need glitz or deep pockets, secret words or secret signs.

We have direct access to God.

Close your eyes, see the Good Lord.

Relax your mind, think on the holiness in and around you.

Listen to your neighbor, hear the voice of God.

Feeling blocked, shut out, unsure?

Go across the tracks to tutor a child to read, and there you will find the presence of God.

You also don't need to go alone.

Would you like a companion and some bread for the journey?

I'm here to walk with you, to ask questions alongside you, to pray and stay with you.

The Church of Jesus Christ is here to support and comfort you,

to liberate and deliver you and everyone

whom God places before us and within the Body.

When it comes to communing with God, God's people are with you;

When it comes to prayer and meditation and supplication, we'll join you.

When it comes to call and response and restoration,

we share direct access, equal access, full access to God the Creator, amen.

"Through him we both share the same Spirit

and have equal access to the [Creator]." --Ephesians 2:18

"...we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him." --Eph. 3:12

Such Foolishness

Jesus of Nazareth was so upset when He entered the Temple of God
to discover Rev. Ike and his ilk thought that they were large and in charge.
Jesus knew that folks don't need accoutrements
for the Lord to hear and respond to prayers and pleas and penitence.
There in the Temple the vulnerable were being taken advantage of;
the powerful were becoming even more so.
The Temple of God had become complicit with commercialism.
How could the Temple overcome economic injustice when it benefited?
How could the choir and congregation sing with liturgical integrity
the Psalms and Laments, the Songs of Solomon, Mary, & Simeon?
Rather than being a House of Prayer,
prayer doves and trinkets were sold as prerequisites for divine action.
God was presented as a distant and removed Being,
rather than as a Being who is present and a presence,
as real as a gracious touch, as mystical as a vision of grace.

The Temple of God in 2018 is to make manifest God's call
to be a viable venue for spiritual formation and succor;
a generative force for positive social change;
a mission station for authentic interactions and love in action.
Instead, in the public square the Church has vacated its hold on the moral center.
The Church has become complicit when it should be confessing.
Understandably too many of our neighbors have written off the Church.
Our zeal shows through, however.
We get upset and frustrated and want to turn tables.

If Jesus of Nazareth strode into Atlanta's churches and temples and mosques,
what tables might He overturn?
We shall overcome...what?
Would he call us to action over economic injustice,
demand we shed light on pharmaceutical companies
that willy-nilly raise prices of medicines, up 100%, up 200%, up 500%,
like Epi-Pins and Daraprim, Nitropress and Icuprel, and more,
abusing and ravaging those in need of healing and financial
relief.
Would Jesus expect us to raise a hue and cry against the Title Loan industry,
which takes advantage of the most vulnerable in our community,
maximizing profits while maximizing pain
for those who can least afford to pay back the loan plus interest.
Here in Georgia the good name of the Church of Jesus Christ
is muddied by being linked with Religious Liberty bills,
bills to legislate discriminatory practices

that oppress our LGBTQ brothers and sisters,
when the Church ought to be inextricably linked
with the liberation of the oppressed.
Might Jesus flip a table or two to emphasize
that we make manifest a just and fair society,
one in which the environment and earth matter more than bottom lines;
health and healing matter more than stockholders' dividends;
and, heaven forbid, people matter more than profits,

Or, is all this Such Foolishness?

Priorities, priorities influence the lens through which we see the Christ in thee.
Turning tables is messy, and rarely a comfort for the comfortable.
Turning tables in the Temple leaves a mess,
coins all over the floor,
doves hanging out in the rafters, goats in the social hall,
people in fancy clothes taking cover as Jesus goes off.
He has a zeal for the House of the Lord
because He first has a zeal for the Lord.
His zeal is not abated.
His zeal, passion, purpose came from being grounded in God's love.

Love in Action is Such Foolishness

Jesus Christ had access to God, and God had access to Him.
This is my beloved son, said God. Listen to Him!
Paul said we have this same access to the divine.
If we have direct access to God, then *ipso facto*, God has direct access to us.
These are my beloved children, says God. Listen to them!

The One who has direct access to you calls for empathy and engagement.
So, my friends, claim the moral center.
Take up a position to stand with and alongside our vulnerable and invisible neighbors,
our widows and children, our blind and lame, our addicted and imprisoned,
our lost and last and least.
Don't be afraid to turn a table or two, to call the world to a place of integrity.
The world stands foursquare in the shadow of a giant plus sign.
The Cross is a visual reminder that God turned the tables once and will do it again.
Turned the tables on selfishness and greed, on complicity and discrimination.
Turned the tables on sin, by forgiving us, giving us a clean slate to start anew.
Turned the tables on death, which does not get the last word.
The last word is God's, and God's Word is Love.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!