
Foolish Wisdom

1 Cor. 1:18-31

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 29, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

“Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 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; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” Who and what God chooses is so interesting. “Not many” in the Corinthian church were powerful civic leaders in Washington D.C., not many were Hollywood celebrities, not many were the rich and famous of Beverly Hills nor the well-educated of Harvard. There were some known like Crispus, Gaius, and Stephanas, but “not many.” Most were unnamed and unfamed and unnoticeable. No PhD, MD, only perhaps a GED, maybe. This was the early church. This is the church, supposedly. Consisting of primarily the weak, the lowly, and despised in the world. Paul must be playing a big joke on us this morning because none of us here would apply for a job boasting that we are weak and despised. This wouldn’t be on our tongues at such an elite institution as Duke. Rather, we might claim that we are the best of the best. We are *the* influencers and movers and shakers in the world, the top thought leaders, the sophisticated Christian intelligentsia, shaping the discourse in our various fields.

But the church is, or at least should be, different. There may be some wise by human standards, some powerful and some of noble birth but “not many.” The vast majority consists of the underwhelming, the underside, and the underappreciated of society. Where are they this morning? This isn’t my ecclesiology, my understanding of the church, this is God’s choosing, God’s church. God chose what is foolish. God chose what is weak. God chose what is low.

God chooses the despised, the ostracized, and the demonized. It should be of no surprise then that later in this letter to the Corinthian church, we hear Paul admonish them to never say to any part of the body, “I have no need of you,” because in Christ’s body everybody is a somebody. There are no nobodies in Christ’s body. “On the contrary” Paul says, “the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect, whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member...” The inferior and weaker ones—God chooses to honor them and welcome them in the community, for any church will be known by how they treat the most vulnerable in their midst. God chooses and uses the foolish, the weak, the low and despised to reveal his heart. A heart, as revealed throughout scripture, for refugees, strangers, immigrants, widows, orphans, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. God chooses the despised and denigrated to be a part of Christ’s body—these are many in Christ’s church. Even in Christ’s inaugural sermon, his ministry focuses on the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed, the scorned and scorched of the world. God chooses marginal figures as members of Christ’s one body.

Those who are despised are destined to make their home with God because God chooses to make room for them in the body. The wisdom of the world may think differently but in the wisdom of God this is the way to unity in the Spirit. The words of the sonnet, “The New Colossus,” are inscribed on a plaque on the inner wall of the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. That poem calls the “mighty woman with a torch,” the Statue of Liberty, the “Mother of Exiles” and says that

From her beacon-hand

Glows world-wide welcome...

Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,

I lift my lamp beside the golden door! (Emma Lazarus)

“Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 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; God chose what is low and despised in the world....”, the wretched refuse, and makes Christ’s church.

Notice that God doesn't build walls but in Christ, has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between people and creates one new humanity, one body in Christ, making peace (Ephes. 2). The church is a mixed class community—some named but many unnamed. It doesn't mean there aren't struggles across social strata like we see at the Lord’s supper in the Corinthian church where one goes hungry and another becomes drunk, revealing tension between the haves and the have-nots. Yet, God chooses to construct a big tent to hold diversity within the church together to work for the unity of the Spirit—rich and poor, male and female, powerful and weak.

Politically, this may all seem foolish but theologically, it is the wisdom of God, a foolish wisdom. “For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” God chooses what is foolish in the world. The word Paul uses for foolishness (*moría*) is from where we get the English word ‘moron.’ So, one might say that God acts in moronic ways and chooses fools, morons, to do the ministry of Christ in the world. If we take a look at some of the Old Testament prophets, we may learn that God has been working in mysterious ways through fools for centuries. The prophet Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for about three years, predicting a future captivity in Egypt (Isaiah 20). The prophet Ezekiel lay before a stone, which symbolized struggling Jerusalem, and though God instructed him to eat bread baked on human waste, he asked, ultimately, to use cow dung instead (Ezekiel 4). And prophet Hosea married a harlot to symbolize the infidelity of Israel before God (Hosea 3). These are not your typical upstanding church members but they represent the unorthodox, foolish wisdom of God, the morons in God’s ministry.

God apparently had gone mad by the looks of it and in early Christianity there was a parody of the method of God's madness and foolishness. The image was called the *alexamenos graffito*, or *graffito blasfemo*. It was carved in the plaster of a wall near the Palatine Hill in Rome. It shows a Christian boy, Alexamenos, being mocked by another boy, or by a group of his school peers. The parody shows a man with a donkey's head being crucified on a tau cross. In front of the cross stands a young man – presumably Alexamenos – raising his hand as if in prayer. At the top of the picture, are the words, "Alexamenos worships his God." His God is in the form of a man with a donkey's head hanging on a cross. In antiquity, though it was applauded for being hard-working, the donkey was also mocked for being stupid. Eventually, the donkey became the regular metaphor for stupidity and foolishness. In Christianity, there was a tradition claiming that Joseph and Mary fled with the Child to Egypt on a donkey, although this specific detail is never indicated in the Bible. The donkey was venerated for many generations as a vehicle for salvation. Even in his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus rode on the back of a donkey, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah, carrying overtones of foolishness, and representing Christ's carnivalesque parody of worldly power and authority. The donkey has always been a part of the foolish history of God so the message of a crucified Christ and its foolishness is captured in this carved image of a crucified donkey-God. It was laughable, foolish, and absurd. This was the folly of the cross caught in an unforgettable image, merging the crucified Christ with a donkey.

"Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise..." God chooses dumb donkeys. Just as God used Balaam's ass, God still uses the same creatures today in the form of human beings. But as that ancient plaster depiction shows, donkeys, the fools of God, the moron ministers, end up hanging out to dry and die on a cross. Fools get ridiculed but they also get crucified.

Yet God chooses donkeys, chooses the weak, chooses the low and despised, chooses the word of the cross to be the power of God. A cross was a symbol of failure and public embarrassment as it was a tool, an ancient form of death row, used to enforce the *Pax Romana*, Roman imperial peace. Revolutionaries, terrorists, criminals, slaves were punished on it and made laughing stocks of society. To be put on a cross meant ugliness, contempt, weakness, loser, unpatriotic scumbag. It was where donkeys belonged. But God chooses the cross and lands on it, becoming a crucified Christ, the means of salvation and the revelation of the power of God. A crucified Christ was an oxymoron. God is a moron, is foolish, has gone mad, is so mad, madly in love with the world for which Christ died. It makes no worldly sense but that's the method of God's madness—a grotesque death to bring us the glory of God and life everlasting—and through the foolishness of the proclamation of Christ crucified, save the world.

A crucified donkey God is the means of salvation. God does things on God's own terms so we would boast in God and find our source of life in Jesus Christ. All of our credentials are crucified with the donkey and we find ourselves by losing ourselves in the foolish wisdom of God and the foolishness of the cross. We discover life at and on the cross with the foolish, with the weak, with the low and despised, the donkeys of today's world, the outcasts, the victims, the huddled masses, the wretched refuse, the migrants who have nowhere to lay their heads, the Christ. The cross of Christ reminds us and tells the truth, not alternative facts, that not many of us are wise by human standards, not many of us are powerful, not many of us are of noble birth, but many of us are morons in the ministry of Jesus. We are fools in Christ's body, donkeys on a mission.

As such, and as argued in a recent essay by Stanley Hauerwas, Christians don't believe in ourselves or country, we believe in God and worship God, a God whose work confounds the wisdom of the world. As worshippers of this God who displays radical foolish love on a cross, we, too, are followers of this chief fool in heaven. When we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "on earth as it is in heaven," this is a call to bring this divine foolishness to earth and to be mad with the love of God, so mad that you become a fool of the faith, a moron for Jesus in the Spirit. Just as God was so foolish to choose us, we're called to choose the weak and choose the low and despised. To choose to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. To choose to speak the truth from our hearts. To choose to be a fool for unconditional love and mercy. To choose hope.

Be that donkey that carries the light of the crucified risen Christ into the streets. Bring the madness because God is mad, a fool, a mighty moron, making the world right. "Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart." In other words, Lord, I want to be a moron for you.

Where are the donkeys? I know there was one on a cross. I hope we have some here, too.