

Luke 22:62-65, 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:2

Foolishness

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Straw poll before we begin: by a show of hands, how many of you came here this morning because among the things in your life that you need a little more of, foolishness is one of them? Is anyone here looking for a little less security in their life? What I want to suggest this morning is that if the answer to that question is, “Ummm, Pastor Jonathan, I don’t think so,” then I want to ask you to hear me out for a few minutes. Because what I have to say might just transform your life, and it may cause you to look at your own life a little differently.

I want to begin by telling you a story, a parable of sorts. There once was a man named Prince Myshkin. Nobody really thought much of the prince. In fact, most of the people who encountered him sort of pitied him. You see, he had spent the last four years in an asylum in Switzerland, before returning to his home in St. Petersburg. Prince Myshkin was pretty unassuming for a 26-year-old; he had a way of garnering people’s trust in a very short time because he was so innocent and naïve.

Pretty soon, Myshkin began to be invited into the homes and to local social functions of a number of prominent people in St. Petersburg. And because he struggles with epileptic fits and is thought to be mentally unstable, people are drawn to him out of pity. Some, namely two beautiful young women, see beyond people’s perception and are able to win the affection of the Prince. But as he travels around from party to party and home to home, what the people of St. Petersburg see is a sort of dim-witted simpleton, who is odd because of his purity and kindness. You see, everything and everyone around him was consumed with power grabbing and social posturing, backstabbing and manipulation. So as he travels around to social functions and homes, he stands out as so utterly different and begins to be a threat to their way. Finally, he too, in his purity of heart, becomes the victim of this malicious society, and the one people saw as an idiot, the one who was utterly powerless, who was actually bringing peace and hope into their lives, is sacrificed on the altar of their own greed.

In leaving as the foolish one, the one who was without power or prestige, what we see is the utter irony that it is in powerlessness that he became the hero. It is in his weakness that he demonstrates strength. That instead of casting the protagonist as the hero who swoops down and saves the day, we meet one who comes down into the mire of their world and lives among them, even being rejected by them. Prince Myshkin becomes goodness incarnate. This is the story by the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky called “The Idiot.” And as we look at this morning’s text from Luke, the next in our series called *Jesus: The Man for All People*, I want us to look carefully at a scene in which our Lord is utterly humiliated, and yet as a part of the larger narrative of the cross, this reveals where Jesus really sought to be a man for all people, by offering himself in service and sacrifice for others.

Now the men who were holding Jesus mocked him and beat him; they also blindfolded him and asked him, “Prophesy! Who is it that struck you?” And they spoke many other words against him, reviling him.

Who is this man Jesus, and why does he allow himself to be subjected to such horrific treatment? I mean, in the text we read just now, it would be hard to imagine someone less likely to change the world. It would seem that this message is totally ludicrous, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul read just a few minutes ago, foolishness. And yet why is it that after nearly 2000 years, there this thing called the Church that is still talking about a man who, in the verses we read today, is so utterly helpless and without power, he doesn't even know who is hitting him?

Author Will Willimon asks: “What kind of sense does it make to believe in a God who, instead of creating and ruling creation with firm and powerful grip, appears to allow things to happen that just don't seem to make sense? A God who doesn't necessarily rescue us from trouble, but rather enters that trouble with us? A God who instead of helping us avoid pain, enters into our pain with us? A God who instead of fixing things for us, addresses them by becoming weak with us in our weakness?”

To address the question, perhaps it bears looking at some of the people's expectations. To begin, Rome, who was the governing authority over Judea was concerned only with maintaining stability and peace, anything that challenged their authority was put down immediately. So you could say that for Rome, a great leader and ruler would be one who governs mightily, who unites people under a powerful center, and who is able to achieve peace in the midst of chaos—no matter the cost. This is what the Romans lifted up as supremely good.

For the Greeks, who by the first century were the purveyors of language and culture in the Mediterranean, in fact though Jesus spoke Aramaic, he probably learned to read and write in Greek. For Greece, wisdom, intellect, and reason were the markers of a person's greatness. The Philosophers and Stoics believed that the ultimate aim of a person's life was to move beyond the cares and needs of the physical body.

And who were the people who followed Jesus around everywhere he went? Poor, uneducated, unsophisticated, fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, and roughnecks. To the Greeks, the whole movement was laughable.

And finally to the Jews, the Jews had been under the thumb of the Romans long enough. They were ready for a leader to emerge who would lead a courageous military revolt, like that of Judas Maccabeus about 150 years earlier. The Jews were ready for a Messiah who would restore the throne of David and the Jerusalem Temple to their former glory.

And yet here we are talking about this carpenter from the sleepy little town of Nazareth who is blindfolded and completely vulnerable in the hands of Pilate's men. This man is the one we look to as the hinge of history, the epicenter of humanity. There's a historian from Yale, a man named Jaroslav Pelikan (I graduated from college with his grandson),

who says that regardless of what you think of the man, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in Western culture for almost 20 centuries.

Here we are so many years later lifting up this story, reliving it, year in and year out. Centuries after the Greek, Roman, Ottoman, and British, all other Empires have fallen or caved in on themselves. Centuries after Nero and Plato and Genghis Kahn, Napoleon, Stalin, Mao Zedong have died and now find their movements and might all just stories in a history book. Still, there is something in the world that even today seeks to remember, relive, and reform itself on the teachings of this man Jesus. The rag tag bunch of followers has turned into a global movement called the Church that is still going strong. Why? Because this man Jesus not only gathered people to him, but showed them true life and then invited them to follow him to the cross, and there he died. Was this utterly hopeless or the greatest end around the cosmos has ever seen?

To show you just how transformative this defeat at Calvary was, let's simply look at a few of the things that have happened since.

The foolishness of this message is that God entered into our world the same way we did, grew up just as we do, experienced life, hope, and pain just like we do. And in so doing unites us by one common thread our humanity. Where before the movement in the church was there the notion that **there is no longer Jew or Greek, circumcised or uncircumcised, Barbarian Sythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you.** That was from a letter that a man named Paul wrote to a church in Colossae.

In just a few weeks, Amy and I will be going with our family to spend time with Amy's parents in Florida. And for his birthday, my son Christian got something very special: a ticket to spend the day in a place called Disney World. Has anyone ever heard of this place? And there at Disney World is a ride called It's a Small World After All, and it has a song that goes with it that will drive you nuts. But where do you think that came from, the notion that every person regardless of gender, nationality, status, and ability is valuable, is beloved, is welcome, and transformed? Do you realize that before Jesus, there was no such notion, there was no such organization? Do you realize that it was because of Jesus the radical notion of liberty and equality that ground our own nation's founding documents were conceived? This was utterly foreign until Jesus. Who was this man?

There was a time when Jesus Christ was a little child, he grew up with a mom and dad, just like us. And during his ministry, he said very radical things about children, things that no others were saying.

Not long after Annie was born, Amy and I took a plane ride and we took up an entire row in the back. There were diapers and crackers everywhere. Every once and a while, people would look back at the craziness that was our family. It didn't look good, it didn't smell good, I was stressed out. Then a guy who was sitting on the row a few in front of us

looked back and said, “You have two children?” “Yeah,” I said. “I would give anything to have two children.” I said, “I’m sorry, were you and your wife unable to have children?” He said, “No, we have 5. I would give anything to have 2 children.”

In a society where children were disposable, Jesus tells his followers, “Let the little children come to me, and don’t inhibit them. Because the kingdom of God is for such as these.” Historians say that in this day in Roman or Greek society, of every 1 million male babies born, 3 to 4 hundred thousand babies were killed, babies that didn’t have the right gender, or the right features, or the right family. The foolishness of Jesus is that he says that “if you want to understand and be wise in my kingdom, you should have faith that is like one of these little ones.”

The foolishness of the gospel is that a person’s value is measured on an entirely different metric. Jesus looked at the whole of society and said to his followers, “The blessed ones are the ones who are poor in spirit, the down in the mouth gang; blessed are the ones who are meek and helpless, the earth will be theirs; blessed are the ones who don’t seek after wealth and power and prestige, but who simply seek to be noble and righteous in my father’s eyes, because they will receive it; blessed are the persecuted, because I will come to their side.”

The foolishness of the cross is that people who had no earthly value or power were loved by this thing called the Church. The historian Rodney Stark points out that around the 2nd and 3rd century, there were these epidemics that would wipe out up to a fourth or a third of the population of entire cities. People would throw out dead bodies into the street, and those that were sick, they would throw out, as well. And this strange group called the Church would gather the sick and dying and bind up their wounds and nurse them at their own risk, because this Jesus they followed used to care for and heal lepers and blind and lame people and care for them.

By the 4th century, what was essentially the first hospital was established by St. Benedict, and that by the 6th century, every monastery had attached to it a hospital facility to care for the sick because people came to believe that it was important for us to care for and show compassion to those who are weak. This notion took root so deeply over the years that at the Geneva Convention, an organization was formed to alleviate human suffering on a large scale and it chose as its symbol a large red cross on a white flag.

Now, this is not to say that without Jesus, we would never have come up with hospitals or organizations that offer compassion to the lonely and lost. And Lord knows that there are many who call themselves Christians, and there have been whole eras of history where people who claimed to be Christians who fell far, far short. But for every health care facility, hospice, orphanage, schools, social services for people who will never be able to repay, there is a good chance that if you dig far enough, that at their roots, they will have begun by a movement that followed Jesus. Again, who is this man Jesus?

Not only were equality among people and the care for the sick and outcast quite literally introduced by this group of people who followed the man Jesus, but other things, as well.

Things like the education system, the artistic and musical renaissance, human rights, political theory, the fight against human trafficking and belief that all men and women are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, a multitude more all in one form or another trace their roots to this man Jesus. This group of people who believed that there was something special, something worth living for, and of course something worth dying for found in this humble carpenter from Nazareth. And though the powerful all throughout the ages have crumbled and fallen, still there is a thing called the Church, filled with people who it would appear are utterly foolish, because they don't measure life the way the world does.

On that day when the man Jesus was blindfolded, battered, and beaten and hung out to dry, it would appear that all he stood for was lost. It would appear that hope was gone. But therein lies the greatest gotcha of all time: that at the cross, as one author has put it, "The world discovered that you cannot beat brokenness."

So then, let the weak say they are strong, the poor say they are rich, let the outcast say I am home, because Jesus went to the cross and died, and three days later, rose and lives today. Alleluia Amen.