

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
March 15, 2009
3rd Sunday in Lent
1 Corinthians 1:18-25

God's Foolishness

It is a common joke with my preacher friends that if you ever want to guarantee a horribly long plane ride, then all you have to do is wear the clergy collar. It is inevitable that you will end up sitting next to someone who needs to tell you all the reasons why he has not been in church for the last 20 years; or someone who wants to talk on and on and on about all the incredibly creative things **her** pastor does; or, someone who decides it is his primary job to be openly hostile to you, the one whom he sees as the representative of all organized religion everywhere. If a preacher wants to guarantee a horrible travel experience, all he or she has to do is wear the clergy collar.

And unfortunately for my friend, this is what happened to her last month¹. She is an Episcopal priest who wears the collar constantly when she works. It is a part of her clergy uniform. Well, last month my friend was returning from a service of worship out of town at which she had just officiated. She did not have the time to change into street clothes before hopping on her return flight. So she sat down, put her nose in a book, and hoped that her seatmate just wanted a nice quiet ride. She was wrong.

"So what are you," the woman immediately asked. "Are you some kind of nun or something?" "No," my friend wearily replied, "I am an Episcopalian priest." "Huh," the woman responded. "I have never met a woman priest before." "Yep," my friend said, still trying to give the impression that she really needed to read her book. "So, can I ask you a few questions?" Clearly, the woman was not going to get the "please leave me alone message." So my friend graciously closed the book, said to herself in her head "this is what you do, this is what you do, this is what you do" and nodded yes.

"I don't get it," the woman began. "I mean, I really do NOT get it. I grew up going to church some and it was fine and I had friends and all, but once I started getting older and reading more and just living more, I decided I had had enough of it. I don't think I have been to church in fifteen years." My friend said she just nodded, pastorally. "I mean, I don't know how you do it," the woman continued, clearly more in a sermon mode than in a question mode. "I don't offend you, but churches are just so out of touch. All I see happening in churches is fighting and discrimination and this pie-in-the-sky mentality. I do not see one single practical reason to get up every Sunday morning and to go to some old building and sing old songs and pray prayers I don't even believe, just for what... because that is what your grandmother did? I just don't get it. I mean, again, I don't want to offend you, but I think that at some point when you start using your brain, you stop needing religion."

And with that statement, she crossed her arms in front of her chest, sat back in her seat and waited for my friend to respond. And my friend said that the first thing that came into her mind was "this is going to be a very long plane ride." And then she tried to figure out how she might respond when she knew good and well that any response she might offer would not make any sense to her arms-crossed seatmate.

Because it does not make sense, does it. God's story as recorded in Scripture does not make any worldly sense at all. It does not make sense that God would choose to call people like Abraham and Sarah and make a covenant with them. And through that one covenant, God would promise to bless all the families of the earth. And it does not make sense that God would hear the cries of a small, powerless people called Israel, lead them out of slavery, and stick with them through all of their unfaithfulness and faithfulness.

It does not make sense that God would keep renewing the covenant with Israel again and again, even though it was crystal clear that they were going to keep messing up and making their own idols. It was clear they were going to keep looking out for number 1 instead of heeding all of the prophets' calls to care for the poor, the widow and the orphan. We could keep going on and on. Because frankly, not to be offensive or anything, but God's story in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, does not make a bit of worldly sense.

And furthermore, if we are on the search for human logic for divine action, it does not get much better with the New Testament. It does not make a bit of worldly sense that God would decide to show the world God's love by coming into history and time through birth as a completely human, completely vulnerable baby. Really, what kind of God does that? Empties God's self completely of power in order to do what, demonstrate a profound strength of love? But our world looks at vulnerability and calls it weakness. And if power is not used as a dominating power, as a power that controls, then the power is seen as useless and wasted.

And what kind of sense does it make to have this Emmanuel, this God-with-us, this Jesus, walking around, teaching, breaking all kinds of societal mores and codes, getting all kinds of negative political attention, as well as raising the hackles of the professional religious folks? It does not make much sense at all. One would think that a wise God would either choose to be a bit more covert about things or, choose to really go all out and blast divine power, **making** everybody understand and believe. **Forcing** every knee to bend and **coercing** every tongue to confess in heaven and on earth and under the earth. The way Jesus chose to live and to do his ministry does not make much logical, worldly sense to us at all. He was the child of a carpenter, from a no-power town in Galilee, who called twelve very sketchy and rag-tag guys to follow him as his disciples. That is not the way to grow a ministry or to have a successful church.

And we've not even gotten to the nonsensical action of the cross yet. As we said last week, at the time of Jesus, the cross had no religious significance. It did not symbolize victory. It had no veneer of redemption. It certainly did not stand for power. On the contrary, the cross stood for weakness, humiliation, and a foolish way to die. The cross was the antithesis to what made sense to the disciples about how their Messiah would act. They were looking for a hero, a warrior, one who would rescue them from the pain of the world. But instead, they ended up with a Messiah who hung there and did not fight back. They, we, ended up with a Messiah who absorbed all of the violence and the hate and even the very threshold of death into his very self.

It is foolishness, really. Absurd. *Why would the Word of the Lord hit the world with the force of a hintⁱⁱ?* A God who suffers. A God who dies. A God who holds nothing back in God's pursuit of us, in God's pursuit of making creation whole again. A God who, through God's Son, provides us maximum support but minimum protection as we fumble and bumble our way

through life, moving from faithfulness into unfaithfulness and back again. None of it makes human sense to us, creatures so used to valuing everything—even our discipleship and our worship—based on what we will get in return. God’s foolish proclamation of love in Christ crucified does not make any sense at all.

My friend said those kinds of things were rushing through her head as she looked at the woman sitting beside her. How on earth could she speak that truth in a way that made good sense? She could not. So, she decided just to be honest and speak faith, instead. “I understand why you feel that way,” she began. She then shared some of her own faith journey. She talked about how she had wrestled with similar questions, how she sometimes, even as a priest, still wrestled with those questions. She talked about the day when, after college, she was driving to her first seminary internship in a church. She was almost there when she had to pull over off the road and stop. “What am I doing?” she thought. “What on earth am I doing? Here I am about to base my entire life Sunday – Saturday, week after week, on something I cannot prove. Something that does not make any sense at all.”

She said she sat in that stopped car for about ten minutes in her moment of existential crisis. She almost turned the car around to go back home and to call it all quits. But then, she thought to herself, well, if God is foolish enough to love me and to call me into this thing, then I suppose I can be foolish enough to love God back and to say yes.

And her words reminded me of our 1 Corinthians text: “For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

But back to the plane: My friend paused in her testimony, waiting to see if the woman had a reaction but she just sat there. “I know it does not make sense,” my friend continued. So she then decided to tell the woman just why she was on the plane that night. She had just buried the father of a church member, coming to the airport immediately after the graveside service.

The man’s father had died the week before, after living a good and long life. And within the past week she and the man’s family had spent hours in both person and over the phone doing what you do in grief – vacillating between moments of tears over the sense of loss, and moments of hilarity over certain family memories and stories.

And after all the planning and talking, the moment to bury the man had come. And they had all stood out at the graveside as my friend led the brief service, uttering the words, “In sure and certain hope of the resurrection, we commit his body to the ground, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” And as my friend spoke those words of truth, his sons picked up handfuls of dirt and placed them on their father’s casket. And tears flowed and loss took hold for a while.

“But then,” my friend reflected, “after all was said and done, we just stood there at his grave for a long time. And we started sharing memories again. And before we knew it, we were laughing so hard that our tears of grief had been replaced by tears of joy over a life well lived and a love deeply given. It was great and the best benediction we could have received. But you know what? If you had just been passing by, you might have concluded that we were being totally inappropriate with our actions. Because it certainly does not make worldly sense to stand by a

grave and laugh. It is not deemed appropriate to experience moments of gratitude and joy at ceremonies marking death. We must have looked incredibly foolish to everyone who passed by. Foolish and irreverent. Maybe even absurd.”

The woman was still silent. By now the “fasten seatbelt sign” had lit up again and the plane was getting ready to make its descent. My friend decided she might as well keep talking. “But here is where the rubber hits the road for me: For those of us who proclaim the foolish wisdom of God’s love in Christ crucified, there is no act **more** appropriate than mixing laughter with grief at the time of death. Because we believe that what we see most clearly revealed in Jesus on the cross is the reality that God chose long ago, before the foundation of the world, to never hold anything back from us.

To refuse to hold anything back so that we would see and believe that nothing in our foolish existence will ever stand outside the realm of God—not our birth, not our joy, not our suffering, not our grief, and not even our death. Because of God’s foolish wisdom proclaimed in Christ crucified, we see and we know that not even death threatens our relationship with God.

And while we may not know exactly **what** is beyond the grave, we do know **who** is beyond the grave. And that is the One whose foolish love for us is wiser than our wisdom, and whose weakness in power for us is stronger than our strength. So yes, Jesus’ foolish and unwise decision to hold nothing back in order to proclaim God’s love, not even his own life, does not make one bit of good sense. But, it is a decision that claims both our life and our death. It is a decision by which I choose to live.”

The plane’s wheels hit the ground. “And frankly, I have stopped trying to get it to make sense anymore. Because it doesn’t. But that does not mean that it is not true.” And everyone on the plane stood to get their luggage. And after a while of standing in silence, they joined the line getting off. And one person left struggling to make sense of it all. And the other one left deciding to lean more into the mystery of God’s foolish wisdom and God’s extravagant love.

ⁱ This story is a compilation of many stories that have happened to both me and my preacher friends.

ⁱⁱ Coffin, William Sloane. Letters to a Young Doubter. Philadelphia: WJK Press, 2005, page 67.