

SLD03.15.09 3rd Lent
I Corinthians 1:18-25
Emory Presbyterian Church
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Foolishness?”

A friend of mine, much maligned by press, profession, and public, frankly deserved every word of it. At first he was defensive, then angry, then embarrassed, then humbled, then contrite. Eventually he confessed his sins, took considerable consequences for them, underwent a lengthy (and required) season of self-examination, counseling and rehabilitation. In the end, after several years, he was forgiven and restored to his family, community and work. It wasn't as if his past peccadillos didn't matter anymore; it was just that finally, through hard work and the redeeming power of Jesus Christ, they ceased to be the defining measure of him. For some people.

Others just couldn't let them go. Just couldn't look past the sin to the sinner, even though those most hurt had forgiven him. In fact, some people hung on to this person's confessed sins like ticks on a coondog, and sucked on 'em and worried 'em, and grew fat from their juice.

One day I wandered onto a website that had gotten hold of this man's brokenness and had a field day with it. I mean, really plumbed it and pumped it and enjoyed its swill.¹ Hooked by their secular sanctimony, I couldn't resist responding: “Good grief,” I said. “I've never heard so much condemnation! Let he (or she) without sin cast the first stone! This guy admitted his error, accepted his censure, and followed all its requirements including years of banishment from his office, individual

¹ <http://disqus.com/people/oglesbyevans/#main>

therapy, an oversight committee, and repeated public acts of contrition! Give the guy a break!’

The responses were several but here’s one that struck home:

“Yeah... It's hard to ‘sin’ against some ‘god’ for which there is no evidence. Therefore, I am sinless :) May I cast a stone now? Actually, I just wanted to point out the illogic of coming on an EX-Christian site and parroting biblical nonsense at us. You seem like a nice lady with good intentions, but we here at Ex-C (which is short for Ex-Christian) (and anyone anywhere, really) are free to judge anyone and everyone as we see fit. It's harsh, but it's our site.”

“Oops,” I thought. “I’ve wandered into foreign territory without knowing it, and am way out of place.” I promptly apologized for not paying adequate attention to the orientation of the website. After all, they had a point; what I had to say to them, my perspective, my faith understanding, and the tradition that informed it was just foolishness in their world.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I received a number of gracious and thought-provoking replies that welcomed me to stay in conversation. In fact, it appeared that this particular Ex-Christian virtual community was genuinely open to dialogue with one whom they regarded as a reasonably intelligent, non-judgmental, non-doctrine-stuffing, hyper-pious Christian. So I did engage for a while, and may yet again. It just takes so much effort to communicate with people for whom the message of the cross is foolishness, with the debaters of this age who demand signs and proofs to believe that God exists, who squint at the sacred through the wisdom of this world and finally regard it as nonsense.

The Apostle Paul would say these ones for whom our beliefs are a stumbling block are the “perishing ones.” Would they agree? Probably not. Would we? Would you and I say these rabid Ex-Christians who disdain the church, dismiss the cross, and revel in fallen angles are perishing? Probably so. But we might better be careful here.

Has anybody here ever demanded evidence for God? Ever doubted that God really exists? Ever wondered whether it mattered one way or another? Ever secretly speculated whether the One we worship is somehow just a projection of our own imagination and need? Or weakness? Our opium?

Or how about this: anybody here ever gotten fed up with church? This church or just church in general? How about with our denomination? How about with me? How about with the whole damn sticky ball of Christian wax? For example, did you ever wonder why a Messiah sent to save the world has to die? And keep on dying every year, us plodding alongside him toward his destruction? I mean, what kind of all-powerful God is that?!

You gotta admit, regarded through the wisdom of this world, the whole schitck does sound pretty foolish.

Uh oh. Does that mean we Christians might be perishing, too?

Made me wonder what exactly Paul means by “perishing.” A quick word study on the Greek word he used – *hā pollumenois* – revealed that it means “the lost ones.” The ones lost to God, that is. Not that God has lost *them*, mind you, but that they have lost God. The ones who no longer enjoy the precious assurance of things hoped for, the priceless conviction of things unseen, or maybe they never did. The ones who have wandered away from, or maybe never been introduced to, the sturdy faith of Abel,

Enoch, Noah and Abraham (Heb. 11), or Mary, Martha, James and John. The ones struggle to understand and persevere in this world the best they can, but do not include the foolishness of a God-arranged resurrection in their portfolio. These are the “lost ones,” the “pollumenois,” the “perishing ones” to whom Paul refers. And if included are all the Ex-Christians, atheists and agnostics of the “Disqus” website, so also are included, more often than not, Jesus’ own disciples, then and now.

Remember Ashley’s sermon last week, how Peter reacts when Jesus talks about his imminent suffering and death, how he takes Jesus aside and rebukes him for speaking such nonsense? Remember Judas who betrays Jesus for steering the movement in such a ridiculous direction? Remember Thomas, who doubts Jesus’ resurrection until he can touch his wounds for himself? Remember the disciples in today’s text listening to Jesus spout crazy talk about destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days?

It’s not just the faithless who find foolish the message of the cross. Jesus’ disciples have always moved in and out of communion with God. In and out of “lostness,” in and out of “perishing” mode, in and out of the appeal of the wisdom of this world.

Take our new vision statement, for example. Whose nutty idea was that? I mean, really. What are the chances, really, that we’ll ever dedicate more of our resources toward mission and worship than toward personnel and facility? What are we thinking? Why, we can barely cover our overhead!

And exceptional education?! Exceptional worship?! Exceptional small groups?! In a church our size? Please. And becoming a congregation of 200 by the year 2012!

Why, that would mean 30 new members a year for three years. What kind of foolishness is that?! Well, Paul would say it's God's foolishness, and that by it we are saved.

Still, who can stop seeing through the eyes of this world? Who is foolish enough to stop operating by its tried and true principles? Sure, we proclaim Christ, and him, crucified, but who wants to substitute human strength with God's weakness? God may have made foolish the wisdom of this world but those Ex-Christians might be surprised to discover that we believers are just as loathe as they to let it go.

The testimony of our faith, though, is that God doesn't choose to save us through the forces of the free market, or fruits of careful planning, or facts of any matter, but through the foolishness of the giveaway cross. The witness of the church is that God doesn't choose to come to us through careful committee work or measured action, but through the shine of a star and the blood of a cross, the water of baptism and the ashes of Lent, the tug of a vision and the hope of a dream.

Some of us think that imagining change, imagining growth, imagining depth and breadth and new possibilities for this church, is "hooley." A few of us catch the Spirit once in a while and then lose it again. Most of us are just tagging along to see what happens.

On my good days, I can see that a lot is happening. Dream Team meetings. First Sunday Lunches. Neat new posts with banners installed by Karen and Debra. Clean corners and shiny steps, a refreshed gravestone out front coming to life thanks to Ray and Carol's and Jackie's ministrations. Through Elise, a new connection with Agnes Scott. New members. A new tenor in the choir. Increased participation in Greta

Reed's Sunday morning series on Lenten prayer. Increased energy and creativity generated by Tom Tewell's discussions on Wednesday nights. Did you hear Lillian's neat idea last week?

Did you know we're fixing to build another Madhouser Hut? That we're knocking around the idea of a community garden? That we're fixing to Change the World with our hearts and hands and pocket change?

It may be foolishness, all this energy and activity, all these ideas and expectations, all this life-changing service, spiritual growth and intention to grow, but it's God's foolishness, and it will save us.

Still, on my bad days, I don't feel like being a fool for Christ. On my cranky, cold, damp days, God's foolishness doesn't strike me as wiser than human wisdom. The world tugs at me with its demands and realities and almost with relief, I join the ranks of the pollumenois, so much more sensible, so much less trouble. And then I think nothing will ever change, that no efforts of mine will ever make a difference, that a fantasy of faith can no more save this church than our own paltry efforts. And then, quite frankly, I just want to climb back in bed. Or back onto the lap of God for some rest and reassurance.

Then the phone rings and some construction workers want to rent our parking space and provide much needed income. Or Karen rearranges the prayer room for the Lenten season. Or a college student says they want to join the church. Or someone comes up with the idea concerts on the lawn in the summer. Or Heather and Molly knock themselves out to produce a newsletter that keeps growing because there's so much going on. Or Tom P. looks at me with eyes that are shining with something he's

learned, and that something is Love. Or two college students want to join the church. Or the choir sings an anthem that brings tears to my eyes. Or Ann H. makes my favorite salad. Or a groups of women sit around a table at Sally's and drink wine and get excited about ways to serve people outside the church. Or the Session comes up with a goofy vision.

And I find myself drawn back into the wisdom of God's foolishness, find myself drawn toward becoming a fool for Christ, find myself enjoying the prospect of beating the odds, find myself wanting to blow a holy raspberry in the face of the wisdom of this world.

Sure, what we're up to these days is foolishness; no question about it. But it's God's foolishness, and it will save us.

So what'll it be? Fools for Christ or pollumenois? Pray for the church or keep it the same? Help build a hut or cruise the web? Invite a neighbor to worship or sit by yourself? Come to Nabb and Etta's tomorrow night to help generate new ideas for Life on the Lawn or stay home and tend to more important matters? Work with God to change the world or choose indifference or despair?

Maybe a little of both. The way I see it, God favors fools. But if you count yourself among the wise, have I got a website for you.

To the glory of God. Amen.