

Faith Mennonite Church
March 8, 2015 – Third Sunday of Lent
Joel Cuffey & Thaine Dirks

Reflections on the Foolishness of God

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; I Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

I am not necessarily an introspective guy, and often feelings are things best avoided. I've shared before of how I told my wife Katie that I don't *repress* my feelings, I just choose to ignore them. The distinction was lost on her. So when I've been in situations where a group of Christians are in some way actively trying to enjoy the presence of God – either very actively in a Pentecostal church, or more contemplatively an Orthodox small group – I never quite know what to do or how to feel. I don't really know what to do with the concept of worshipping God. Similarly, when I think of making sacrifices for God, I think of deeds I do – helping an NGO, for example – or don't do – going to war. In short, I feel very at home in a church populated with German last names.

So it is with some discomfort that I read about Jesus' cleansing of the temple in the gospel of John. Unlike the other gospels, where it is clear that Jesus is prophesying about the destruction of the temple, in John, Jesus is pretty clearly disagreeing with how the temple cult is being administered. His specific accusation is: "Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" This accusation and the subsequent Psalm reference suggest that Jesus is acting because he disagrees with markets for the sale of sacrificial animals being on the temple precincts – no necessarily because he disagrees with the temple or sacrifices in and of themselves. So for Jesus the problem is *how* the sacrificing and worshipping is done that is a problem – using a market in the temple to fulfill the obligations of the law, all the while taking the "spirit" of respect and love for God out of the law. In saying this, Jesus is squarely within the prophetic tradition, which is rather ambivalent towards the temple cult.

So I want to ask myself and us during this time of Lent – how often do I "fulfill the obligations" of sacrificing my time or money to God (not, actually, all that often), but do so without "zeal", as the Psalm reference in John says, or as we might now say, "love". The apostle Paul says that "if I give all I have to the poor, but don't have love, I gain nothing." So now I need to figure out what this "love" is – Paul makes it pretty clear that it's an attitude, which is uncomfortable. The penitential Psalm, Psalm 51, says that "my sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, you, God, will not despise." *God* might not despise it, but for me it's a sign of weakness! In any case, great, now we have: "love", "broken spirit", "contrition". More attitudes, if not outright *feelings*. But also attitudes without which I can't really be said to be worshipping or sacrificing to God.

More specifically for me, how often do I speak about being peaceful, without loving those who engage in war? How often do I complain about the current economic structures, or even engage in anti-consumerist acts, without loving those who propagate capitalism and consumerism – both at the top and bottom of the economic spectrum? How often does a "preferential option for the poor" mean that I end up hating someone? How often have I felt generalized hatred towards Republicans? And finally, how often have I prayed a prayer of confession, without actually being contrite?

So this Lent, as we explore ways of living that are foolishness to the world, let us also explore ways of continually converting ourselves to attitudes of love and contrition. –*Joel Cuffey*

This text from Paul's letter to the Corinthians tells of an alternative perspective on reality. Wisdom and power were valued in the culture of the Corinthian world. But Paul does not say that Christ came so that the Corinthians could be even better at the culture of wisdom and power. God's message was upside down, foolishness, and a surprise. I don't think Paul would have advocated for stupidity or misuse of power, but his focus was on the God's spirit of generosity and sharing. There is a contemporary story, if you will allow me to say that contemporary means during my lifetime.

It is an example of turning things upside down, foolishness and a surprise. I have heard and love this story and have retold it to my daughters. It has been retold by many others. It was related by Parker Palmer, a well-traveled Quaker theologian. You may very well have heard it before. I'm sure you have heard it in a parallel form from the Bible.

I'd like to read a retelling of that story from John Buchanan, while he was pastor of the 4th Presbyterian Church in Chicago.

We had invited (Parker Palmer) him to lead a retreat and preach, and in his sermon he told a story that has now circulated widely and has been used by practically every preacher, including me, at least once. The story takes place in that time, long ago, fast receding in memory, when there were no security lines at airports, no electronic screening, and you could carry pretty much whatever you wanted in your briefcase or purse onto the airplane.

Palmer was on a flight from O'Hare to Denver that pulled away from the gate, taxied and taxied and taxied for a long time. You know the feeling. You look out the window and you're not near a runway in line to take off but are out in a remote corner of the airport looking at a chain-link perimeter fence; your heart sinks as the engines wind down. The pilot came on the intercom, "I have some bad news. There is a storm front in the west, exactly where we are headed. Denver is socked in and shut down. There are no alternatives. So we'll be staying here for a few hours. That's the bad news. The really bad news is that we have no food on board." (This story is from that blessed time long ago when there was real food on board and passengers actually looked forward to a nice tray of real food with cloth napkins and silverware.)

Everybody groaned. Some passengers became angry. (As a side note, the retelling I originally heard indicated that people were shouting that their tickets were binding contracts, that they were due a meal, and that they would sue the airline.) But then, Palmer said, one of the flight attendants stood up in the aisle and took the mike. "We're really sorry here, folks. We didn't plan it this way, and we can't do anything about it. We know that for some of you this is a big deal. You're hungry and were looking forward to a nice lunch. Some of you have a medical condition and really need to eat. Some of you may not care. So I have an idea. We have a couple of empty bread baskets up here, and we're going to pass them around. Everybody put something in the basket. I know some of you have brought a little snack along, just in case—peanut butter crackers, candy bars. Some of you have Roloids, Life Savers, chewing gum. And if you don't happen to have anything edible, you have a business card or a picture of your kids or a bookmark. The thing is, I hope everybody puts something in the basket. And then we'll reverse the process. We'll pick the baskets up at the back of the plane and pass them around again and everybody can take out what he or she needs." "Well," Palmer said, "what happened next was amazing. First, the complaining and griping stopped. People started to root around in pockets and handbags and briefcases. Some stood up and retrieved luggage from the overhead racks and got out boxes of candy, a salami, Italian sausage, cheese, crackers, a bottle of wine [it was in the day you could actually do that]. Now people were laughing and talking. The flight attendant had transformed a group of anxious people focused on their need, deprivation, and scarcity into a gracious community, sharing and in the process creating an abundance of sorts."

The flight eventually took off and landed, and as he stepped off the plane, Palmer found the flight attendant and said, "You know there's a story in the Bible about what you did." She said, "I know that story. That's why I did it."

It is a much-loved story. In the early Christian church, when the community gathered, under the cover of darkness, to break bread and drink wine and remember Jesus, they always read this story about the day he fed the multitude with five loaves and two fish.

May we be ready to follow God's foolishness. – Thaine Dirks