“These Foolish Things”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

I don’t know if Eric Maschwitz and Jack Strachey would ever forgive me for what I am about to do to the lyrics of their long-popular song. Maybe you won’t either, and I pray no one thinks it is blasphemous or irreverent. I would say that it may certainly be a bit foolish. You can tell me later what you think.

A lowly manger as your birthing station

A lakeside office to invite the nations

Life sometimes suffering brings.

These foolish things remind me of you.

A crown of thorns that left its bloody traces

The cup we bless and bread we’ve shared for ages

And still the Spirit sings

These foolish things remind me of you.

You came, you saw, you defeated all,

When you did that for me

I knew somehow death no more would be.

The cross reserved for those whose lives were wasted

A tomb where nothing like your love abated

God conquers all the devil brings

These foolish things remind me of you.

This song was in my head all week and particularly during our Bible study on Thursday, which I will share a bit more about later. I hope, in fact, that during this period of Lent I may continue to be as focused on the oddity, the otherness, what we will call the holiness of what Jesus has done for us. I hope that you also might open your hearts to understand just what a gift it is to us that Jesus took what others would call foolish, and raised it up. I’m thinking just now about marching and singing, remembering one of the chants we sang on Saturday at the Poor People’s March: “Lift from the bottom and everybody rises.” That’s Jesus’ message!

We remember our king—who teaches us to lift from the bottom . . . We remember our king with a meal of bread and juice. We celebrate his birth in a stable. We hold up the symbol of the greatest gift God has given us—the cross on which a convicted criminal was killed. These might be foolish things in the eyes of those for whom success is defined with the eyes of the world. If we see them as less than great, we ought to be somehow ashamed. We are not at all wise.

We read last week about God’s covenants with God’s people. There were laws that God provided, which would set the people of Israel apart from the rest of humanity. Those things done in Egypt and in Canaan are not to be done by Israel, so that they will know you are different from them, said God. Certainly, Jesus’ manner of ruling God’s people was not what was done by the Romans in rule over them. Certainly, our king has not provided for us the more typical symbols of royalty. His crown was made of thorns. He was enrobed for mockery. We spent some time in our study on Thursday morning talking about the different images the Church has chosen for its cross. I actually wear a Celtic cross on Sunday morning that does have a tiny figure of Jesus on it, which is not the empty cross we Protestants usually choose. I didn’t choose it but wear the gift because I received it from people I love. I have chosen not to lean on the symbol of the crucified Christ as much as I lean on the joy I know from the resurrection, which is probably best symbolized in the smaller, empty cross I wear close to my chest, a gift from my mother. About symbols, I am not particularly dogmatic; I choose to honor the gift.

I don’t know about you, but all of this *does* sometimes seem foolish to me. When I look at the state of the world we live in, rife with conflict, trembling under the weight of war and the fear of outright destruction, I can slip into a feeling that what God has provided isn’t enough. I don’t imagine I am alone in this. It is at such times that we have to wonder whether we are living into what God has given us. *Are we living in such a way that what Jesus taught us is fresh on our lips and in our living?*

Jesus’ way, a life of discipleship is different, radically different from the way of the world. It will look like foolishness to those who continue to define success or wisdom, even power in the same way as others do. God asks that we keep ourselves holy, by definition set apart from what others would do and be—set apart for God. This means taking up the cross that Jesus bore and bears for us.

The Rev. Margaret Aymer, Academic Dean at Austin Presbyterian Seminary, reminds us just how remarkable is God’s choice of how Jesus died. Perhaps it will help us to regard our central symbol more clearly. She writes, “But, says Paul, God chose what is foolish to shame those who think they are so wise. God chose the weak to shame the strong. God chose the low and despised to reduce to nothing those who think they are something (1 Cor. 1:27).” Aymer continues, saying “this is a political claim. Paul argues that God used the Roman equivalent of the lynching tree and character assassination. God used the cross on which a person was displayed to the world naked and helpless, emasculated and left to die for hours, mocked, beaten and crying out for mercy under the unforgiving desert sun. God used this moment of utter dehumanization and death in the name of peace and security to shame all of the powers, all of the wisdom, all of the philosophers, and of the mighty of the first century.”

To whom does this message speak most clearly? Most forcefully? It is no wonder that it speaks to persons in developing nations. We talk about the church’s shrinking here in the U.S. and in Europe. The church continues to grow in China, in Africa, in parts of Latin America. It is no wonder that there is hope in its words for those in our own country, too, who are most despised. Would you care to name them? Where in scripture do we read that we are to despise anyone? Where in scripture do we read that we are above anyone else? Rather, taught Jesus, we are to serve rather than be served; we are not to seek the acclaim, the power or the safety the world would offer, but to delight in what the Lord gives to us and asks of us. We are called to serve those most in need. And isn’t that a radical way to set ourselves apart?

How foolish would it be to live peacefully, serving others and making certain that we are providing for those who do not have what they need to live comfortably. How foolish would it be not to question where a person comes from before we feed them? How foolish would it be not to wonder whom a person loves before we welcome them? How foolish would it be not to harm someone else because they want to harm us?  “**25**For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” In response to our discipleship in Christ, we are to live lives separate from the wisdom of the world. We are to seek above all else to be right with God, even when to do so appears foolish. Those of us shivering outside in Augusta yesterday, as we united our voices with those who live in poverty, may have felt foolish, but if to do so makes me so, I will be a fool for Christ.

Each time that I have moved in the past nine years, I have shuffled another gift of a cross, one on which I physically can lean as I walk, and one on which I occasionally lean for spiritual support. A friend made it for me as a walking stick, for my fiftieth birthday, and he included on it small nails in the places of Jesus’ hands and feet. He said, “that’s the way it would have been seen,” He also inscribed on it words that are a reminder of what Jesus asks of us. We are to take up Jesus’ cross as we follow him. I almost, no I definitely don’t care what your theology about Jesus us, about his personhood or divinity. But when we say that we follow Jesus we are meant to take on the burden of living for others. Jesus makes very clear that to follow him is, in a word or in a symbol, is foolishness. We are to yoke ourselves to the one who served us even to the point of dying on a cross, and we are to serve while we live so that we also will be raised with him. To the foolish servants of the Prince of Peace and Love is promised eternal life in love. Amen.