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Pentecost 16

Judges 7.2-8, I Corinthians 1.18-31, Mark 8.27-38

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“Do You Have Enough Faith to be Foolish?”

*[Jesus] asked [his disciples], “...who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah!”
Then [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering,
and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ...
And Peter ... began to rebuke him. But ... [Jesus] rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan!
For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” ...
“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.
For those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”*

What Jesus was proposing was foolish! How could anything good come out of him dying?!
That’s what Peter’s rational, reasonable, logical brain told him. And so he told Jesus.

So here is the question: Who among us would have advised Jesus any differently? Anyone?
My guess is that most of us would have sided with Peter on this one. At least at first.

It is part of our culture – in the mainline church anyway – to think link this:
God gave us brains and so if we use our brains to make decisions we are doing what God wants.

But that’s actually NOT what the Bible teaches.
Yes, God gave us brains; but God also gave our brains freedom of choice.
And that freedom is always between 2 things.
We often speak of it as choosing between good and evil,
but framing it in that way isn’t helpful since none of us are likely to consciously choose evil!
We can frame it as choosing between God and the devil,
but again, none of us here consciously choose to follow the devil!
What Jesus suggests is that we look at it as a choice between human and divine –
in other words, a choice between doing things our own way and doing them God’s way.

When we think back on it, that was the story in the garden of Eden.
The original sin was that humans wanted to be like God.
Humans chose to do what they wanted instead of what God wanted.
Humans did what was wise in their eyes, regardless of what God said.

And this is such a difficult lesson for us to learn, or even to wrap our minds around!
We want to put our trust in our own reason, in our own common sense, in our own intelligence.
We want to do that which is wise in our own eyes, and we don’t want to do what seems foolish
even if it is what God asks.

We just have a hard time admitting to what Paul says, that
“²⁵...God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”
So what does it mean to trust in God’s foolishness?

Well one of the best examples in the Bible is the story of Gideon's shrinking army. God told Gideon that there were 135,000 enemy troops on their way to attack and that he should get prepared. And so Gideon manages to put together an army of 32,000 – only 1/4th of what the enemy has, but it's the best he can muster. And at least he does have God on his side.

But then God says, "You've got too many!

Because if you win, you and everyone else will think it was because of you and your men.

And I want you and everybody else to know that it's because of Me.

So tell the troops that whoever is afraid is dismissed and can go home.

Now if Gideon had done the reasonable, rational, smart thing, he wouldn't have listened to God.

But because God had performed so many signs for him, Gideon had learned to trust

and so he does what God asks and says to the men, "If you are afraid, it's okay. Go home."

22,000 go home, leaving only 10,000 to fight 135,000.

And then God says, "You still have too many! Have them all drink from the stream.

Keep those who lap like a dog, send the rest home."

Gideon does as he is instructed and he is left with only 300 soldiers! 300 to fight 135,000!

And then what does God do? God says, "Give them each 2 things: a horn and a clay jar.

And when I give the order have them blow their horns, smash their jars, and shout."

And when Gideon's troops do this, the enemy runs and the Israelites win!

Now here is the thing: this is how we are to live our lives.

Let me repeat that: THIS IS HOW WE ARE TO LIVE OUR LIVES.

And now let me hear you say it: THIS IS HOW WE ARE TO LIVE OUR LIVES!

Why? Because God says so.

Because God is God and we are not.

Because Christ is our King and we are his subjects.

Because Jesus Christ is our Lord and Master and we are his servants, his slaves.

You and I are not used to being servants or slaves.

You and I are used to having control – for the most part – over our own lives.

You and I are used to having our say.

You and I are used to doing what we think is best, what is smart, what is wise, what is safe, what is in our best interest.

But that is not what servants or slaves get to do.

They don't get a say. Their opinions don't matter. Their feelings don't matter.

If the master says jump, they jump.

If the master tells them to do something risky, they do it.

If the master tells them to do something foolish, they do it.

Why? Because the master is in charge.

We spend so much of our time and talent and treasure trying to make sure that we will be okay, that we will be safe and comfortable, that we will remain in control.

But Jesus says if we are trying to save our lives, if we're trying to secure our future,

if we're trying to do what we believe will serve our best interests, we are going to lose.

Jesus says that if we try to do things *on our terms* and *on our timeline* then we're not following him.

If we truly want to follow Jesus, it's not about things being on our terms but on God's terms.

It's not about things being on our timeline, but on God's timeline.

It's not about following our own wisdom, but following Jesus

even when it means doing something foolish, or something that seems to be against our own interests, or something that may even lead to our destruction and death.

It's not about using our brains to determine the wisest course of action.

It's about listening for God, discerning what God wants, and doing what God asks.

The question Jesus put before the disciples then is the same question he puts before us today:

Who do you say that I am?

If we claim that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Master, then we can't be our own lord and master.

If Jesus wants us to do something foolish, we need to have faith enough to be foolish.

If Jesus calls us to follow him one way, we can't go our own way.

If Jesus asks us to give up our comfort & safety, our power & privilege, our freedom & control, we need to obey.

I stand here and tell you these things, and I know how crazy I sound. Believe me, I know.

But these are not my words. They are the words of scripture, the words of our faith.

Let me read to you once again from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

*¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,
but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

¹⁹For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

²⁰...Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

*²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom,
God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.*

²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom,

²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,

²⁴but to [us]... [the crucified] Christ is the power ... and the wisdom of God.

²⁵For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Like you, I've grown up in a culture that values intelligence and wisdom and common sense,

But that intelligence and wisdom has not brought about the things it promised.

What I'm learning, however, is that the more I learn to trust,

the more I discover that God's foolishness is greater than my wisdom.

The more I obey, the more God is able to do amazing, astounding, awesome things in my life,

The more I learn to see myself as servant to my Lord,

the more God is able to accomplish through me.

The more I stop trying to control my own life and let God control it, the more joy I experience.

We have grown up in a church culture that has taught us to hold onto so many different things –

to our wisdom and knowledge and common sense,

to our theology and history and polity,

to our society's values and beliefs and structures,

to our time and talent and treasure,

to our security and safety and control.

We have been holding onto these things so tightly

and what we don't see is that they are exactly the things that between us and Jesus.

Jesus longs to take us in his arms, but his arms won't reach around us and all of our stuff.

His arms are outstretched and he invites us to let go of everything that we're clinging to and just cling to him.

And when we are able to do that we will find a peace and a love and a joy

that makes all the foolishness totally and completely and absolutely worth it!

To that God whose foolishness is greater than our wisdom,

be all honor and glory and praise – now and forever. **Amen and Amen and Amen**