

“Fools for good”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 5:1-12 and 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

We are fools. How’s that for an opener? I really know how to win over my audience, don’t I? But before you storm the pulpit, hear me out. We *are* fools. Right now, we could be sleeping in, bundled up in warm blankets; or eating brunch, enjoying waffles drizzled with syrup and butter; or sitting on a sandy beach somewhere. Instead, we are here, in this drafty old building, worshipping a God we cannot see, listening to a guy talk, and talk, and talk.

We are fools. While others get paid, we volunteer.

We are fools. While others are lounging in the comfort of their own living room, we’re stuffed in a cramped, hot kitchen, preparing meals for strangers.

We are fools. While others are holding onto every dollar they can, we are giving our money away.

We are fools. While others talk about sensible things like national security, we carry water into the desert and wrap our arms around the immigrant.

We are fools. While others do everything they can to stay out of prison, we bend over backwards to get in there, to sit with the incarcerated, to see God in them.

We are fools. While others seek to enjoy the privileges of wealth and power, to advance and protect “theirs”, we confront the very systems of race and gender, of sexuality and economic status, that privilege us, we challenge oppression and injustice, we stand with those the world would silence or leave slain in the streets.

We are fools. While others sensibly trust what they can see, touch, and weigh, we give our lives to a God who is a mystery beyond mysteries, we devote ourselves to Prayer and Waiting and Reflection. While others fill themselves, we empty, we stare into the unknown, we face our shadows, and we are not afraid, because we believe—perhaps insensibly—that only an empty cup can hold the drink that is the Love and Grace of God.

“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,” writes the Apostle Paul. Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor... Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek... Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the peacemakers.” We are fools.

At least that’s how the world sees us. Worldly wisdom says: be strong and happy, achieve success, defeat your enemies, get “yours.” And frankly, that sounds pretty good. Why would you give up all that for... this?

It wasn't easy being a Christian in Paul's days. And it's not easy being a Christian today. I don't mean the name. There are plenty of people who carry the name, but whose beliefs and actions are nothing like Jesus. It's easy to carry the name. But when Christians dare to be true to the gospel, when they stand with the marginalized, when they believe in God despite the evil of the world, when they are compassionate and giving, they are scorned as unrealistic "bleeding hearts."

It's not so different being a Scout these days. There are lots of children who are spending their time building resumes, playing video games, and working paying jobs (when they're older), while you volunteer and do service projects, learn about a vanishing outdoors, and serve unnoticed people in unnoticed ways.

We who are Christians, and Scouts, walk a path the world thinks ridiculous.

You know what? Good! Because, um, have you seen the world lately? Australia's on fire. We're on the brink of war with Iran. Children are afraid to go to school. Synagogues and black churches are being attacked. Children are being caged and separated from their families. Politics have become selfish, nasty, and divided. People are getting poorer, hungrier. They're depressed, addicted, lonely, overworked, lost in a flurry of media distractions and empty entertainments; even the rich and famous aren't happy. If this is the measure of the world's wisdom, I'd gladly be a fool.

Jesus says that we will know the tree by its fruit.

To be sure, we Christians, we Scouts, are far... far... from perfect. We mess up, all the time. Conflict brews. Someone's having a bad day and says something thoughtless. We get caught up in minutia that doesn't matter. We get lazy. But even those failures make the point: when we mess up, we talk about it, we own it, we forgive, we all become better for it. Certainly, there are churches, and Scout troops, that have bad fruit. We are all familiar with the abuse scandals, the churches that are no more than glorified social clubs, the history of exclusion and pain given to our LGBTQ family, the concessions made to the ugly politics of today. But those aren't churches. Those aren't Scouts. They're wolves in sheep's clothing. They are just more of the world's wisdom: get yours, protect yours, regardless of whom it hurts.

The true churches, the true Scouts, no matter how imperfect, we are bound by a different, and altogether foolish, wisdom. A wisdom of love, and humility, and sacrifice, and bravery, and truth-telling, and worship.

There's a reason why all the research data shows that people who belong to a church, who volunteer and serve like you Scouts, are happier, live longer, and have stronger support systems. That's not why we do it. If it were, that would be just more of the world's wisdom. We do it because of love—for each other and for God.

Because for all the wisdom of the world, Paul says, the world still did not know God. He's not just talking about "getting saved." He talks about finding a love so powerful that it transforms

you. To know God is to know that your life matters, you matter, completely independent of what you achieve, or how much you have, or how pretty or famous or smart you are. It means to know that you are utterly and inexhaustibly loved. It means purpose. It means belonging to something so much bigger than yourself. It means arms that catch you when you fall.

It means everyone. Old and young, poor and rich, fat and skinny, man and woman and transgender, gay and straight, white and black and Latino and Asian, abled and disabled, liberal and conservative. Everyone. What a stark contrast with the world, where some people matter, and some don't. Paul writes, "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose [you]."

Why are we then so afraid of appearing foolish?

They said Vincent Van Gogh was a fool—no one wanted to buy his art—and now he's considered one of the greatest artists of all time. They said J. K. Rowling was a fool—she was broke, living on welfare, a single mother, and no one wanted to publish her book—and now we have Harry Potter because of her. They said Albert Einstein was a fool—his teachers said he was stupid and would amount to nothing—and now he has changed the scientific world forever as one of the greatest minds humanity has ever seen.

They said Jesus was a fool. He died. What kind of savior, what kind of God, dies?

Maybe it's time that we stand up—with Jesus, and Vincent, and J. K., and Albert—and say that we are fools. Fools for love. Fools for good. While everyone else in this world takes whatever they can, we—like the fools we are—stand up and say that the value of a life is found not in what we take, but in what we give. For, when everyone's insane, maybe it's the fools who've got it right, after all. **Amen.**