

“On Being Fools for Christ”

1 Corinthians 1:18-31; John 12:12-19



April 1, 2007

Dr. Bruce W. Porter

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This is a day of celebration. It is an anniversary of fifty years for Church of the Palms. Fifty years is not very old as churches go, is it? So we should be young in spirit. Right? Today is also Palm Sunday which honors Jesus’ brief but enthusiastic welcome when he rode into the capitol city of Jerusalem on a donkey. The crowds waved palm branches and cheered. And in case you didn’t notice, it is also April 1, April Fools Day. That’s a day when we play practical jokes on the gullible, and then say, “April Fool.” I’m told the Scots call it “cuckoo day.”

Well, how do we put all that together with joy and appreciation knowing that we are entering the solemnity of Holy Week? I offer you this: The Christian faith we have followed over the past 50 years and will follow into the future is foolish to the world that surrounds us. It is absurd. We keep trying to picture our faith as reasonable and natural and American and usual. It isn’t. The Apostle Paul charges us to be “fools for Christ.” That is, we are to be as foolish as God was when He set up this salvation plan with you and me being free enough to sin, and the solution being his Son spread-eagled on a cross.

Now I also remember one of my professors in Seminary saying, “Being a fool for Christ is not the same as being an ordinary darn fool.” That’s true. Jesus didn’t suggest we be stupid. He said, “Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” That means we should be “street smart.”

Nevertheless, what we believe and what we trust and how we live have a crazy kind of foolishness as the world goes. It is zany. And that’s where the power is. So, I call on you on this special day to be as foolish as our Lord was and is, and to anticipate a future more foolish than you have ever been in Christ’s name.

First, I would call on you to trust the foolishness of love. Love doesn’t seem to have much power, as the world goes. Read your morning newspaper and it appears that brutality, and terror, and crookedness and war are the

powers that rule. We are called to be a love force in our world. Robert Frost, the American poet, had placed on his tombstone, “I had a lover’s quarrel with the world.” So do we, as lovers. But what power is there in that? It seems so flimsy, so foolish in the face of raw force.

We think of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey carrying love. He would face the loveless power of Rome and the callousness of a religious establishment waiting to snuff out his life. Jesus had no army but twelve men and one of them a traitor, and no crown except one of thorns, and no throne but a donkey. He was like Don Quixote, tilting at windmills. How do you win a world by loving enemies and turning the other cheek? One of my friends catches the absurdity when he says that turning the other cheek sounds like a good way to be smacked on the other side of your mouth. We might add, it’s a good way to get crucified.

Yet, we are Christ’s Church and called to love. Not, of course, mushy, sentimental feelings. Not “feel good” stuff. No, our challenge is to offer and give undiscouraged good will to those around us, beginning here, and then out into our community and world.

Even that sounds wild and moronic. But did you read the story that was in all the newspapers or see it on your television sets. A mad man killed all those little children in school. And the Amish community grieved as they rode their black buggies to the cemetery, but then one of them explained, “We will not let hate take over our lives, for then the Evil One wins. We must forgive.” Unexplainably they welcomed the killer’s wife and children into their homes and offered help and consolation to them. It makes no sense; it boggles the mind. It would be bizarre, unless it is they who have caught the spirit of the King. And their foolishness strangely warms the heart.

The foolishness reminds us of the Civil Rights days when African Americans were marching with love power, sometimes surrounded by German shepherd dogs and fire hoses. Once I heard a black leader announce, “No matter what you do, you cannot make us hate you.” They offered love power to the music of “We shall overcome.~~

We are finding out today, that we can win wars with bayonets and bombs, but we cannot win people’s hearts that way. We are finding that we need

some things in our churches. We need fine preaching and strong teaching and able administration and clear vision. Of course. But most of all we need powerful, undaunted love. Church of the Palms has had it these fifty years; so let's keep that foolishness and grow in that foolishness for Jesus' sake. Jesus didn't suggest it, you know. He said, "A new *commandment* I give to you, that you love one another, as I have loved you."

By the way, where is the unloving power of Rome now? Napoleon is reported to have said, "Caesar, Charlemagne and I have founded great empires on force, and lost them; but Christ founded an empire on love and millions would still die for him." Trust the foolish power of love.

Secondly, be foolish enough to be servants of others rather than their masters. O, you say, "Who would choose to be a servant when you could be the boss? Who would want to wait tables when you could sit at the head and give orders? Surely, you must be joking."

But then I remember that when we ordain elders and deacons as leaders in a Presbyterian Church we say this curious thing: "Whoever among you wants to be great must become a servant of all, and if he/she wants to be first among you, he/she must be the slave of all." Exclamation point! I should say so. We say the most preposterous things in church, only because they are true. But don't pretend they are logical, especially to the folks out there.

When I was in Seminary, a hundred years ago or so, the President, John Mackay, used to talk about the "Servant Image." He was referring to Jesus' keeling down and washing his disciples' feet, and going to the cross on behalf of humankind. It was Jesus on Palm Sunday riding in on a donkey, instead of a white charger. We are to be like that —and I quote: 'just like the Son of man who came not to be served but to serve.'

Do you know why churches are strong and vital? It is because they serve. Look at Church of the Palms. For what are you known? There is a Pre-school all these years serving children and parents, and a remarkable tutoring ministry to children and youth from our schools. I was at Christ Church, Longboat Key last week at a dinner for about one hundred people. A young fellow said to the lady seated next to me, "In his former Church Dr. Porter had more kids being tutored than there are people in this building." And I

stuck out my chest and said, “What he says is only the truth.” You are known for an eye clinic in Honduras which was Doug Perry’s vision, and for Habitat for Humanity and the homes you built, and for a television program that reaches shut-ins and their caregivers every Sunday morning and for those bags of groceries that go out of here every day of the week. And more, more. It’s because you serve.

I used to say when I was here that the greatest days for Church of the Palms are ahead of you. And they are, when you foolishly give yourselves away in service to each other and to others. We each have a place to serve, and we don’t need to be perfect to do it. Luther said, “God can ride the lame horse.”

There was a foolish, whimsical story going around some time ago. It was about the donkey that carried Jesus into Jerusalem on the morning of the parade. It takes place on the Monday, the morning after. As he awakened, the colt was still aglow with the memories of the most exciting day in his life. So, he decided to take a little donkey stroll into town to say “hello” to the crowds who had cheered him the day before.

The problem was that nobody noticed him —no cheers, no palm branches. He was peeved. Then he brayed, “Throw your garments down, wave your branches, I am here.” One merchant slapped him on his rump, and shouted, “Get out of here, pronto!” Our hero muttered something equivalent to “Miserable heathen!” and he sauntered off to another marketplace.

But again, no one recognized him, nor paid him any attention, even as he strutted triumphantly along the road. “Where are the palm branches?” he cried. “What’s happened to the hosaimas? Yesterday I was it. Today, no one acknowledges me at all”

So he shuffled on home to his farm and stall, up on the Mount of Olives. Hurt and confused, he returned to his mother’s side for comfort and consolation. “Poor boy,” she said. “Precious child. Don’t you see, they were not cheering for you. They were cheering for Him, the Master you carried, the one who rode on your back in the parade.”

“Foolish child” she concluded. “Don’t you realize that without Him, you are”
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just an ordinary donkey? Without Him you are just an ordinary donkey.” (That’s something I have wanted to tell you for 22 years, and now that I’m semi-retired it’s safe to say it.) Without serving our Lord, you and I are just ordinary donkeys, but serving Him and each other we are servants of the King.

I can’t leave you there. There is the foolishness of love and the foolishness of being servants. And finally there is the foolishness of anticipating life in the midst of death. Some of you know where the charter members of Church of the Palms met at the beginning, fifty years ago. It was in a funeral home. Right? It was in a funeral home on Bee Ridge Road. That is a place that honors those who have died. Could that small group of members have ever imagined that this congregation would swell to 2,500 or 2,700 members? Maybe not, but they had a dream of life in the midst of a place of death.

Now, I know that it is tricky to bootleg Easter into Palm Sunday. But Jesus did it often, telling his disciples how he would die, but promising that he would rise again. Besides, we as a congregation have already celebrated fifty Easters. Isn’t that true? We are always an Easter people! The point is that it is only we Christians who are so foolish as to celebrate life coming out of death. While the body still lies in a casket here on the floor, while the tears are still on our face, while the picture of the deceased sits among the flowers in the chancel, while the grieving family still holds onto each other for dear life in the pew, we gather in worship to listen to the Doxology, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow,” or to recite the words I used in nearly every funeral for 40 years:

The strife is o’er, the battle done;
The victory of life is won;
The sound of triumph has begun: Alleluia!

The powers of death have done their worst;
But Christ their legions has dispersed;
Let shouts of holy joy outburst: Alleluia!

Let Church of the Palms keep that faith for the future, as foolish as the world thinks it is. We are not likely to be crucified for our faith, but as a

congregation and as individuals, we will meet challenges and low moments. It is then we need to be resilient and, with the help of our God, to rise again.

You know, the crepe hangers are saying that the Christian Church in America is done. Well, our death has been greatly exaggerated. Our Lord is not dead! He is alive!

Let's march on. Let's be fools for Christ, because the foolishness of love, the foolishness that serves, and the foolishness that anticipates life coming out of death —is the wisdom of God.

Isn't it strange,
That fools like you and me,
Are builders for eternity?

It really is. Amen

(This Sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. Bruce W. Porter on April 1, 2007 in Church of the Palms, Presbyterian, in Sarasota, Florida on the occasion of the Church's Fiftieth Anniversary. }



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