

“Foolish Love”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
March 7, 2021

1 Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22

Welcome to worship at the Church of the Weak, the Fellowship of Fools.

Notice, I did not put these slogans on our church sign outdoors-- otherwise, Betsy, our Membership and Outreach chair, might resign her committee in protest. I'm not *that* foolish. The truth is, most people want worship to affirm their wisdom and support their strength. We don't exactly advertise that we want you to believe impossible things, and speak honestly about the things we might rather not see... which makes talking about the crumbling of the beloved, Jerusalem Temple, and the death of Jesus-- the man hoped to be the Messiah who would save everyone-- clear foolishness.

Paul describes the wisdom of the cross as foolishness. While most of us might discount foolishness as something to be avoided at all costs, we might note some ways that entering the role of the fool *can* have value. In the world of William Shakespeare, often the fool would be the one with the most insight or intelligence; a court jester, for instance, might use sarcasm and irony to critique the king's leadership and expose his shortcomings.

I spent many years doing youth ministry, and some of my mentors who were especially good at this work taught me something about the theology of play. I've learned that instead of just diving deep into a bible study with teenagers who might be bored to be at church, or terrified to be at church, or both, leads to a flat discussion. So, first we play. Whether doing goofy energizers like they do at Camp Johnsonburg, or working together with a group to form a human washing machine, when permission is given to be a little bit... silly with our bodies and creative with our language, a surprising trust sometimes comes about. Disbelief gets suspended. Walls crumble. As people focus on engaging their bodies, it's as if their minds suddenly become freer. And then, the grace of God bubbles up, often in ways I had never planned or expected. That is the power of foolishness.

The theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote a book called *The Theology of Play* and I wish I could get my hands on it, but this book, written in 1972 and out of print, is selling-- used-- on Amazon for \$499. It would be utterly foolish to buy it. The Christian life, according to Moltmann, is not to be envisioned as a 'purpose driven life' but, perhaps, as a game of delight in the God who creates and redeems the world for nothing. As we play, we participate in the creative power of God.

I will be inviting the church to participate in something that may feel foolish to Presbyterians raised in this country, who are known for being the “frozen chosen” and who have done a great

job in educating the mind about God, but perhaps at the cost of teaching the body how to experience God. A song with a great beat, out of South Africa by Master KG and singer Nomcebo Zikode, has inspired a dance, and the dance has inspired a dance challenge-- even Cyril Ramaphosa, the President of South Africa, called upon South Africans to all dance to the song "Jerusalema" to reflect on the the difficult journey we have travelled during COVID-19, to remember all who have lost their lives, and to quietly rejoice in the remarkable and diverse heritage of our nation. From groups of children, to Janet Jackson, to a group of Reformed pastors in clerical robes in Zurich, at the cathedral where Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli preached, people across the world have been inspired to dance the Jerusalema challenge. The lyrics to the song, when translated from Zulu, sound like a lament: "*Jerusalem, rescue me; don't leave me here. My place is not here. My kingdom is not here. Save me.*" A lament-- and yet, the song has caused great joy among people who dance it. Perhaps it is the catharsis of throwing yourself into the hope of something better that it is yet to come that gives such joy. I'd like to find out; and so, we have a group of people who will practice this dance after worship today, in the church parking lot; we're preparing this dance to record as our Palm Sunday parade at the end of the month, when we remember Jesus marching into Jerusalem. Some participants, like Keyla and Sibon, are great dancers. Others, like myself, maybe not so much. We may in fact feel foolish trying this out. There will be chairs for a rhythmic clapping and palm-waving section for those who won't dance. But by joining something that is beyond ourselves, we may in fact discover greater holiness, joy, and connection, to God and to the global church.²

Last week our Jewish friends celebrated the holiday of Purim, when Jews playfully reenact the story of Esther. Kai's friend borrowed a costume for the event from Kai, because the story is best told wearing silly costumes, to show Esther's hidden identity as a Jew while serving as a queen in the palace. Esther reveals her true identity at just the right time, causing a turning of the tables so that Haman, the advisor who had been planning a mass slaughter of the Jews of the land, would end up going to the gallows he had planned for the Jews. The story is often told with the adults drinking throughout, so that by the end of its telling, you can no longer remember who is the hero, and who is the villain, because of the great reversal that happens in the story.

In our Gospels, Jesus really turns the tables-- both literally, and figuratively-- even on himself. Do you remember Jesus of the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to find the one lost sheep? Well, in today's passage, Jesus snaps a whip of cords, driving the sheep and chickens out of the Temple marketplace. Remember the Jesus of the humble widow who caringly sweeps her home from top to bottom to find just one lost coin, and rejoices upon seeing it? Well, today Jesus dumps the money-changers' containers upside-down, tumbling all their coins to the ground. Remember Jesus, who set a table so purposefully to serve the Last Supper and then told of his passion by making the bread his body, the cup his blood? Well, today's Jesus flipped the tables over in a fit of passion. His performance that day in the Temple was utterly foolish; but it was also lovingly wise.

It turns out, the Second Jerusalem Temple would be destroyed just a few decades after Jesus' death by the Romans, as a punishment for Jewish revolt. And throughout Judaism, they were already grappling with the question of how to carry their covenant identity beyond the walls of

the Temple. As for Jesus, he was trying to show the people that he WAS-- he IS-- the Temple, a Temple that will dwell eternally in them, in us.

I love the work of Southern author Flannery O'Connor, who-- like me-- came from Georgia. She wrote a short story that alludes to our gospel text; it's called "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" and is told through the perspective of a younger child, whose family has taken in family friends-- twin, teenage girls -- as guests for the weekend.

All weekend the two girls were calling each other Temple One and Temple Two, shaking with laughter and getting so red and hot that they were positively ugly, particularly Joanne who had spots on her face anyway. They came in the brown convent uniforms they had to wear at Mount St. Scholastica but as soon as they opened their suitcases, they took off the uniforms and put on red skirts and loud blouses. They put on lipstick and their Sunday shoes and walked around in the high heels all over the house, always passing the long mirror in the hall slowly to get a look at their legs. None of their ways were lost on the child.

[The younger girls' mother] asked them why they called each other Temple One and Temple Two and this sent them off into gales of giggles. Finally they managed to explain. Sister Perpetua, the oldest nun at the Sisters of Mercy in Mayville, had given them a lecture on what to do if a young man should--here they laughed so hard they were not able to go on without going back to the beginning--on what to do if a young man should-- they put their heads in their laps--on what to do if--they finally managed to shout it OUT--if he should "behave in an ungentlemanly manner with them in the back of an automobile." Sister Perpetua said they were to say, "Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!" and that would put an end to it. The child sat up off the floor with a blank face. She didn't see anything so funny in this.

Her mother didn't laugh at what they had said. "I think you girls are pretty silly," she said. "After all, that's what you are--Temples of the Holy Ghost."

The two of them looked up at her, politely concealing their giggles, but with astonished faces as if they were beginning to realize that she was made of the same stuff as Sister Perpetua.

[The words are all over the child's head now.]I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost, she said to herself, and was pleased with the phrase. It made her feel as if somebody had given her a present.

Now, at the surface, the Jesus we see in John chapter 2 does not look like he is coming to bring presents. Can you even imagine if someone came into *our* church like that? I know there's a certain church member who will remain nameless who hates the painting hanging above the mantle in the Fireplace Room, but other than that we love our church building: the velvety cushion of our pews; the way the light filters through our stained glass windows; the cherished table from which we share in Christ's meal, the Font which marks the start of our faith journey. And of course there is also the brand new kitchen and handicapped-accessible bathrooms which had just been renovated; we barely had a year before the pandemic kept us from enjoying them.

But, like it or not, we have had to leave our cherished spaces and figure out how to find the Temple without being located there.

The wooden pews with their deep red velvet cushions, the stained glass, the baptismal font, and the communion table where we are fed will still be here for when we are ready to return. Heck,

even the picture above the fireplace will likely still be there, unless it mysteriously “disappears.” The architecture of our worship space is, for the most part, meant to stay the same.

But here's the thing: *we are not called to stay the same*. When our bodies are Temples for Christ himself, then we-- like Jesus-- are called to live, to die, and to live again.

Are we fools for following Christ? Perhaps. Probably so. Hopefully so. Thankfully so. Because if the status quo our world gives us is what is “normal,” then by all means, let's be foolish enough to long for more. Amen.