

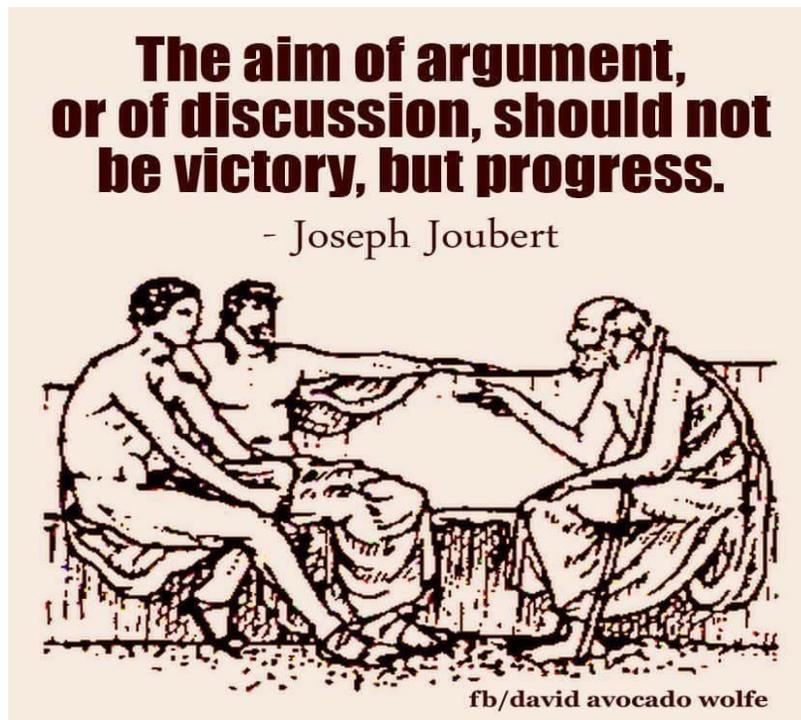
Sermon for National Capital Presbytery Installation Service
Tuesday, January 24, 2016

“God’s Foolishness”

Elder Therese Taylor-Stinson, preaching

Come Holy Spirit! Come! May the words from my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I love Memes! I use them on Facebook to encourage myself daily and my Friends. I have a Meme to read to you this evening, at the beginning of my sermon, to encourage a positive meditation of our hearts and hopefully a productive ending. It reads:



Praying that my words tonight lean toward progress in this 500th year of the medieval Reformation.

As many of you probably know, but may need reminding, the culture in Corinth was not very different from the culture in National Capital Presbytery, or living and working in Washington DC, or the culture in academic institutions, especially those Ivy League institutions, where there is a certain standard that must be maintained to keep their prestige, and graduates from these institutions are given a level of prestige and privilege that many deserving others are not. Corinth was very much in line with the dominant Roman culture--an aristocracy, where there were those born into nobility and prominent thought leaders, whom held positions of influence and privilege in the society, as well as those whom sat at their feet and or were baptized by them, while the commoners remained on the margins except for perhaps a few chosen to compete in the gladiatorial games, which might afford them a certain status or privilege if they won and were not killed.

I have read the Bible from cover to cover a few times over, as well as commentaries, and books on theology, religion, spirituality, consciousness, self-help, human development, leadership, and many others. Yet, I have not in many ways conformed to societal expectations. I guess you could label me a non-conformist, like Jesus. (Perhaps that's why I've also made my home in the PCUSA for over 30 years!) Like Jesus, however, my nonconformity has at times taken me to the cross, where at least at the time, I didn't want to be. Yet through God's foolishness--the cross, or perhaps my own foolishness that God has used to shape and form and deepen me (to wake me up), I have become and am becoming the person that stands here today. I have learned God's foolishness is that, when a real change of course is needed,

God doesn't use the wisdom of the dominant cultural paradigm. God uses someone or something outside the common storyline to make change. A change that challenges our big assumption that we can simply equip ourselves to do God's work in the world.

Some scriptures have become life passages for me and 1 Corinthians 1 is one of them. The first time I encountered that passage in a deeper way was studying it to read at my then dear friend's ordination sometime in the mid- to late 1990s--about 20 years ago. When she first asked me to read the passage, she couldn't decide whether I should read certain verses or the whole chapter. She said to me, "I'm not sure, but be ready to read the whole chapter." So, as I often do, I began to live with this chapter over a couple of weeks. The passage spoke to me personally and to my life, which at the time was under construction as I learned to be comfortable in my own skin and to celebrate who I am authentically, with or without the approval of others. On the day of her ordination, she told me she wanted me to read the whole chapter, and I did with all of the conviction that had grown inside me from living with it in the past weeks. I think I read it so passionately that I surprised some. It was Advent, and the next day, I visited one of my dear church mothers. She offered me a box of mints, which also included messages. I picked one. It read "God giveth grace to the lowly." I showed it to my mother-friend and told her how timely the message was for me. It was an intimate note from God. God's foolishness! But God's foolishness is only foolish to those who are bound to the dominant cultural perspective.

The more things change, the more they remain the same. Have any of you read the book and or seen the movie "The

Hunger Games?" Like the culture in Corinth, we common folks continue to struggle through life to obtain "best gladiator" status. And that old saying that those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it is coming to pass with episodes from the Reconstruction Era in the mid- to late 1800s and Hitler's rise to power between World Wars I and II-140 years and nearly 100 years respectively. Our current situation is ever unfolding, now with reminiscence of the Cold War beginning in the mid-1900s. Apparently, God has a different understanding of wisdom and power than those readily accepted in our common cultural contexts. As one commentator wrote, "True knowledge of God probably refers [in the Corinthians text] to a correct understanding of what God is doing in the world rather than a proper apprehension of God's being and character." What God is doing in the world takes us first to the cross--foolishness to the world's understanding of meritocracy and privilege.

Last year, while we watched the native tribes, along with others, protest the Dakota access pipeline at Standing Rock with authorities assaulting them with rubber bullets, water hoses, and tear gas, I read this: "Bundy Brothers Acquitted in Takeover of Oregon Wildlife Refuge." Meanwhile, President Obama denies a final permit for the Dakota access pipeline at Standing Rock, while apparently another pipeline was started under the Des Moines River in Iowa. More than 600 people were arrested for protest at Standing Rock and nearly 300 were injured. Compare that to eight arrested and 1 killed in the Oregon Wildlife Refuge takeover, where they were white men armed on Federal property. I read recently the protesters at Standing Rock are still there, and today our new President gave the green light to continue the pipelines.

This is why you cannot equate black and white. If these had been a group of armed black men overtaking a Federal facility or standing en masse in protest of lead in the water in Flint, or Ferguson, make no mistake about it, those black men would be dead. Period.

You can't say "All Lives Matter," until you demonstrate its truth by acknowledging Black Lives Matter, which currently, systemically, they don't. Too many are still given the economic value of slaves and treated as less than human, with no more remorse for demoralizing us, criminalizing us, and killing us than for others in the animal kingdom. As we learn more about life on this planet, we become more certain that the animals we put beneath us are also sentient beings. India, a few years ago, recognized Dolphins as "non-human persons." Meanwhile, in America, black and latino persons make up the largest portion of the prison population for crimes that white's only get an admonition, if that, and others become wealthy from the prison system as a business.

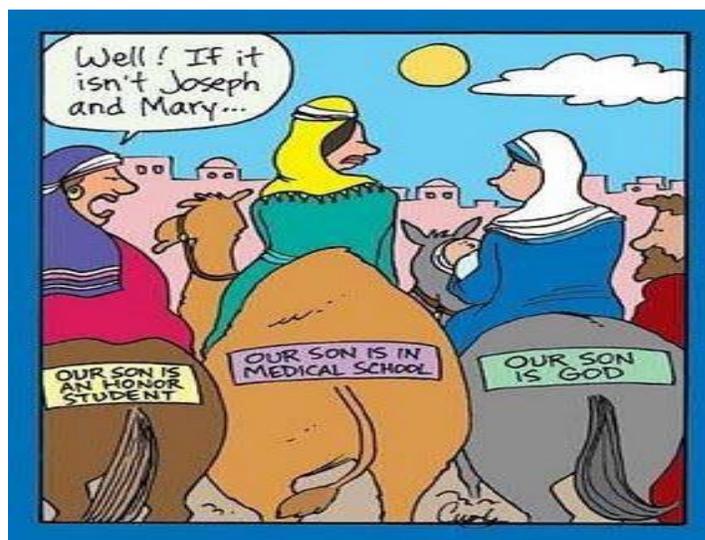
"Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women;" says Audre Lord, "those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference -- those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older -- know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women [and men] who still define the master's house as their only source of support."

Audre Lord, an African American writer, feminist, womanist, lesbian, and civil rights activist also wrote, "This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns." [Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." 1984.] You see, it is part of the systemic nature of systems to keep us conforming to its vision of superiority. Many people of African decent and those immigrants not fully assimilated to American culture because of language and or non-European appearance and or culture have occupied themselves with the master's concerns for too long, believing assimilation, education, and economic security would cause them to blend in. Some believe they hold privilege equivalent to their European counterparts, and many of their European counterparts encourage this belief while they continue to hold the reigns and disparage the majority of others. Frederick Douglass said "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has, and it never will." Ah, but God's power! God's power transforms our suffering into resilience--Resurrection! God turns power on its head and crushes the world's wisdom with the foolishness of the cross. Such an upside down turning of power happened with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And such a turning of power happened 500 years ago when Martin Luther challenged the priestly power of his day.

The Leadership Council of National Capital Presbytery presented our revised Vision and Mission Statement this evening, where one of our primary mission emphases is to "Bear public witness to the love, truth, and justice of God in Jesus Christ specifically in the areas of racism and reconciliation." This year also marks 500 years since the beginning of the last reformation, where Martin Luther

declared "All Christians are priests, and all priests are Christians. Worthy of anathema [accursed] is any assertion that a priest is anything else than a Christian." Yet, in all of our reformed glory, we in the Church are still separating ourselves from one another on the basis of race, socio-economic status, religious beliefs, gender, gender identity, and education, with those who have created and or assimilated to these systems declaring themselves more worthy than others whom have been left to fight in the gladitorial games for their natural rights as inhabitants of the planet.

Diana Butler Bass, in her talk on the Church and spiritual awakening in the new Millenium before the annual NEXTChurch gathering in 2015, said that those who are spiritually awake and moving through this evolutionary phase are coming from all walks of life, all levels of education, and that, when they come together, they speak the same language and share information regardless of their socio-economic status. Then they go back across the bridge and bring others into this new realm.



[Three women riding their favored equine transportation.]

The Church has been a long-time player in this deception that some are more worthy than others, even using scripture and commentary, balconies and servitude, in support of slavery, segregation, Jim Crow, and other forms of oppression and abuse of humanity. When I read a verse from Deuteronomy 21:23, "His body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.", I understood more clearly the actions of the so-called 'Christian' Klu Klux Klan and the image of 'strange fruit' hanging from the trees, during Reconstruction and through the establishment of Jim Crow laws in the South, as a statement of the black man being cursed by God. Oh, but for the foolishness of God, that strange fruit becomes a sign of the cursedness of some who misunderstand the cross of Christ. We have an obligation in the Church to be among the first to break down those walls of separation and going back and forth across the bridge until the bridge is no longer needed. NCP made an effort in that direction with the Racial Awareness Festival last fall, where we left the walls of our congregations and joined with others in the surrounding community (300 in number) across denomination, socio-economic status, with different skill-sets, and multi-racial to increase our awareness of racial issues, which leads to testing our current assumptions and changing behavior.

In the book *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a 14th century monk writes of two ways of prayer or contemplation: Kataphatic (thoughts, words, and images) and Apophatic (silent or empty or forgetting). The Cloud lifts Apophatic prayer as the better part, but I think the mature contemplative employs both words and silence, as well as contemplation with action. Likewise, Paul argues for an intellectual humility because when we think

we know, we shut ourselves off from wisdom, from new discoveries, from discernment of God's action in the world. We go from willingness to willfulness. As the Buddhists say, we should start each day with a "beginner's mind." How can we, as the Church, come into this new Reformation, alongside an evolutionary period on the earth, in a way that allows us to be participants in God's foolishness, as subverters of the dominant culture? How can we begin to reorder our disordered love, to borrow an idea from St. Augustine?

I end as Paul ended the first chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians:

26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters:[g] not many of you were wise by human standards,[h] not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one[i] might boast in the presence of God. 30[God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in[j] the Lord."

May it be so! Ase!