

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
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God's Foolishness

January 30, 2011
4th Sunday after Epiphany

One of the hardest things in this life is to face your fears. Of all the journeys of life, facing what scares the living daylights out of you has to be one of the hardest. This is true for a child, for a young person, for an adult, for the elderly, for us all.

I remember frequently having nightmares as a child. I would go over to my parent's room, crying for some comfort. Dad would usually be snoring. Mom would usually comfort me. I would dream of monsters in the dark, usually scratching at the window, probably because there was a bottle brush bush that scratched at the window in the wind. But what I saw and experienced was the man with the burnt out mouth that suggested he was charred all the way through and simply appeared normal on the outside, what I have called in later life, "the burnt out man."

I have dreamed of being in the back of the car and going over one of the long Bay Bridge bridges in the San Francisco, and the car goes over the side and hits the water, and then the water slowly fills up inside until there is barely room to breathe, then I wake up.

I have always liked to be liked, but am slowly realizing that not everyone will like me. I told you of the one comment offered to me last week. Then there was the person who told an elder close to me in Western Canada that she could not talk to me openly because I was too big, i.e. physically big. It's hard to know how to respond to that. Or another person who called me long distance after I had left a congregation and told me that I had told blatant lies at the last congregational meeting that I attended, and went into some detail. After completing her speech, she said "Now that I've been able to share that with you, we can be friends again." Now I didn't take much logic or philosophy at university, but there was something flawed in her thinking.

Thus I have learned I will not be able to get along with everyone I meet. I used to think I could get along with anyone. But I have met some notable exceptions over the last 25 years or so.

And it's not because I don't try to get along with others, as the Scripture says, "As far as it depends on you, be at peace with everyone." (Romans 12:18; Hebrews 12:14) Nor is it because they don't try to get along with me. At least I don't think so. What can happen is that I put too much effort into trying to make people like me, fearing that they might not. The problem there is that you can only be what you are and the moment you try to entertain, or manage, or control others you get into weird and exotic relationship dynamics, rather than just being yourself as you are.

Many of these patterns we develop as children and hardly even know if we are that way in relationships. If a parent was depressed, or alcoholic, or moody, or silent, or constantly speaking, or any number of obsessive or compulsive behaviours, we are affected and we develop our coping mechanism and defense mechanisms appropriately. However, what worked for us as children usually works against us in later life.

Fears of rejection, fears of the unknown, fears around our own death are quite normal. If you have had none of these, I'd be pleased to talk with you and ask you about your other fears or anxieties.

But let me let Paul cut to the heart of what was happening in the church in Corinth instead. Here he was bold enough to talk to a congregation in crisis, divided, immoral, chaotic that much of what they might have thought was wisdom was foolishness, and vice versa. He was bold enough to say that they were neither wise, nor powerful, nor of noble birth, not what the Quebecois call "pur laine" or an umpteenth generation Newfoundlander.

What he was trying to say was that it was God's work that would bring them together, not their homogeneity, not their unity, not even their agreement on all things. God was the one who would have to face his fears so that they could have a relationship with God and have the family they always needed to have but could never find.

God, who is like the prodigal son's father, waiting on the front porch through the wind, and the scorching heat, and the cold; always keeping an eye out for the son might come home someday and put aside the rebellion that took him to a far away country. And some of us pity that father who loved so desperately and wonder how much hope he actually had.

Our picture of God of course is painted in much deeper and richer colours than even this picture of the prodigal son's father. The reality is the Programmer becomes the program, the Encoder becomes the code, the Creator becomes the created and God faces loss as never before, the loss of His Son, previously forever with Him, now off on a mission, where he is in real peril. He is inognito. Few recognize his royal credentials when he turns up. He faces real temptations that would divert him from his ultimate goal. He stares down possible shortcuts and easy fulfillments. He entrusts himself to a small group of unknowns, like himself.

And he has to face his fears. He faces fears of rejection. The Scripture said he would be rejected, and some would even despise him. He faces the fear of the unknown, for who can look into the face of pain, torture and death and say they are confident. He faces becoming the Lamb of God on which the sin of the world is placed; making a way for us to have relationship with the Living God. He takes our penalty on himself as the Judge pronounces the guilty verdict over the masses of humanity, each one responding differently.

And Paul says many will consider this foolishness. Greeks and other Gentiles may be looking for some kind of wisdom or philosophy or world view or ethic or political structure. Jewish people may be looking for miracles and signs that would support the Messiah's reality and the new order.

Both these groups see the torturing to death of Jesus of Nazareth as the proof that this is simply foolishness, that there is nothing of God in it. But Paul says the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom. And if this displays Jesus' weakness and vulnerability, Paul says that the weakness of God is stronger than the greatest human strength. Because Jesus accomplishes at the cross what generations of God's people and everybody else could not.

And that singular event of torturing to death the God who created us becomes the pivot point of all history, simultaneously showing us our worst qualities and providing grace for our transformation into the image of the One who gave himself for us. That event becomes the place of healing, the place of facing our fears, childhood and otherwise.

In Hebrews 2, the writer clearly says:

¹⁴ Since the children have flesh and blood, Jesus too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

What God is doing in these days is a work of facing our fears, facing death, facing our loneliness, facing our confusion and questions, facing everything that seems so hard to face, trusting the One who faced it all.

What is it in your life and mine that we need to face? What is it in your life and mine, that we need to stop, for heaven's sake? But we cannot. We need God to do a work and we need to agree with that work.

What is God calling us as a church to face? To stop? To change? Pray for the Board and Session as they seek to look at our future this coming Saturday.

We need each other for this journey. We need to stick together at the foot of the cross where we are all the same.

Let us pray.