

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Following Foolishness

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Beloved siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The prophet Isaiah speaks to people living in darkness. This isn't the darkness of night, but the darkness of oppression: the heavy yoke and the violence of the rod. It's the same darkness seen today in immigration detention centers, where families are separated and kept behind bars, and in the inhumane practice of linking healthcare to employment instead of human need. It's the same darkness that comes when empires crush the vulnerable and systems of power grind down those on the margins.

Matthew continues to develop this theme by noting that Jesus began his ministry in Galilee of the Gentiles. He didn't start in Jerusalem, the center of religious power, or in Rome, the center of political power. Instead, he chose Galilee, a multicultural crossroads far from the centers of power, where ordinary people struggled under the darkness of Roman rule. This is the marginal Galilee, a place where the aroma of freshly baked bread mixes with the briny breeze of the nearby Sea of Galilee. It is here, amidst ordinary lives shaped by toil and tradition, that a great light has dawned.

Here's what we need to remember about that great light: the Kin-dom of God isn't just a distant promise for another time or place. It is close. It has always been close. It is in Galilee and in Ghana, in Williamsburg and Wuhan. We see it when we do what Jesus did: healing, feeding, and sharing the Gospel Good News. Take a moment to reflect: when was the last time you witnessed or participated in an act of healing, feeding, or sharing? Those moments serve as reminders that the One who "breaks the rod of the oppressor" is not far away, but right here with us.

Jesus walks along the Sea of Galilee and does something that seems foolish to those in power. He calls fishermen, people with steady jobs, family businesses, and

economic security, to leave their nets and follow him. Consider the social and economic losses they faced: leaving the family trade might mean giving up a livelihood passed down through generations, risking the community status and support that came with it. Opting for an uncertain future with no guarantee of daily bread or a roof over one's head was daunting. Leaving your work. Leave your security. Follow a wandering preacher into an uncertain future.

Today, similar risks are taken by those who choose paths that defy societal norms or economic stability in pursuit of a higher calling. They embody faith by stepping away from predictable careers, stable incomes, and the comforts of conventional life, seeking instead the promise of a greater purpose. The world calls this foolishness. Common sense would say: Keep your head down, stay stable, and don't risk what you have.

But this "foolish" choice, leaving the nets and following Jesus, is the first step toward a liberated life, even under Roman rule. Because Divine Love doesn't move to the same rhythms as conventional wisdom. It is a radical departure of thought, of behavior, of relating. It prizes vulnerability over domination. It is humble. It is courageous. It is willing to lose and risk for the sake of community.

It is the choice to support a refugee family in the face of mounting government xenophobia. It is the choice to feed and shelter those experiencing homelessness in our communities without any reward or recognition. It is the choice to found and fund a shelter for women experiencing domestic abuse. It is the choice to love and serve our neighbors, even when all around us is the message to worship and serve power instead.

The psalmist declares: "God is our strength and our salvation. Of whom shall we be afraid?" This is not naïve optimism. This is not pretending that danger doesn't exist. This is the radical confidence that comes from knowing that God is near; that a power more powerful than evil's greatest deed is faithful to us. This knowledge gives us cause to stand. To resist. To ask the question that tyrants fear most: "Of whom shall I be afraid?" No rulers nor authorities, powers nor principalities can overcome those who trust in God.

But here's the beautiful paradox: We don't seek God's face in isolation. We don't find Holy Wisdom by retreating from the world. Instead, as queer and BIPOC

theologians remind us, seeking God's "face" is found in the "Sacred but ordinary possibilities of working together for good." Remember those examples I asked you to think of a few moments ago? Simple acts of kindness. As theologian Emilie Townes describes, "The Holy can be found in the ordinary and the mundane," affirming that our shared acts of kindness and justice are profound encounters with the divine.

We meet the living God in the sanctuary of community. In God's community, there are no hierarchies. No one stands alone before their oppressor. Love cares for every hurting person, and all the temptations of evil are shown to be lies. This is why we come together. This is why we need each other. Our courage is renewed by the Spirit when we choose to live by Holy Wisdom instead of the false promises of evil and dominance.

Now we turn to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and we need to be careful. Unity, a word that should be beautiful, has sometimes been used as a weapon. There was division in Corinth. People argued over leaders: Who is wiser? Who is right? Who should be trusted? Paul heard about these arguments from Chloe's people, and it's possible some disagreements were about whether a woman like Chloe could lead the community.

Paul calls for unity. But we have to ask: Unity around what? LGBTQIA+ theologians put it well: "For many LGBTQIA people, even the mention of unity is enough to make the hairs on the back of our necks stand up." For too long, calls for unity have been used to silence those seeking justice, to keep a false peace, and to protect the status quo.¹

If we start from inequality, if conventional wisdom still rules, and if social hierarchies go unchallenged, then calls for unity only strengthen the dominant group. Unity becomes a tool to silence the marginalized. But this isn't the unity Paul was calling for.

Paul called for unity because he wanted those who were still trying to make a case for inequality and for replicating social dominance to get on board with this new

¹ Carpenter, C., Durick, J. A., Grafman, M. L., Hardin, P., Harmon, N. B., Murray, G. M., Ramage, E. V. & Stallings, E. (April 11, 1963). A Call for Unity. The Birmingham News. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/call-unity>

way of life together. The common ground was an agreement that the community would live in accordance with the wisdom of God, which proves the foolishness of conventional wisdom.

Paul goes on to say: “Consider your own call, siblings: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 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; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.”² This is God’s strategic choice. God intentionally chooses people the world calls foolish: Women. Queer folk. People of color. People with disabilities. Strange people and quiet people. In the Kin-dom of God, these people, usually forced to the margins, are at the center.

True unity is only possible when we share the same mind and purpose. That purpose must be God’s radical, even foolish, wisdom that values vulnerability over domination, lifts up the marginalized, and humbles the proud. There’s a big difference between sticking together to live out radical values and simply keeping a false peace that supports the dominant culture.

So what does this mean for us, here and now? **First**, it means individual responsibility. We must each tend to the barriers within us that keep us from showing up for ourselves and for one another. For those of us with privilege (and we all have privilege in different ways), this means doing the spiritual work of humbling ourselves.

Men need to notice how much space they take up in meetings, how often they interrupt others, and how they assume they know more than women or nonbinary people. White people must keep checking how white supremacy encourages control, arrogance, and avoidance. Whatever our privilege, we need to face the messages we learned early on that tell us we are more important, more deserving, or more capable than others.

I have memories of times in my life during meetings when I have aggressively contradicted a woman's idea, utterly convinced I was right. It was only after the fact, when I reflected on why I felt such urgency to dominate the conversation, that

² 1 Corinthians 1:26-27 (NRSVUE)

I realized how my privilege had colored my actions. This awareness has led me to start listening more actively and respecting the diverse voices around me.

Such realizations aren't about guilt; they're about growth and ensuring fairness. This isn't a heavy spiritual burden. With commitment, grace, and the gift of relationship, this sacred work feels more like healing, like growing in our understanding of the world, and moving deeper into the heart of love.

Second, it means working for collective liberation. We are called to “live foolishly” together by choosing a path that lifts up the marginalized and humbles the proud, even if it's uncomfortable for those who have long benefited from power. We must reject false unity that silences and suppresses. When violence is built into the system, “there's nothing virtuous about finding common ground.” We can't pretend everything is fine while structural violence continues to harm people.³

We need to name patterns of dominance, interrupt them, and hold each other accountable. Like in any relationship, the biggest threat to unity is ignoring or hiding wrongdoing and hoping it will go away.

Here's the promise: those who choose this so-called foolishness find abundance. This sacred work helps us understand the world better and brings us closer to the heart of Love. When we agree to live differently, with values like “all are worthy,” “inequality won't be tolerated,” and “putting the needs of the suffering before the comfort of the privileged,” we rely on each other for accountability.

This work is exciting and freeing, though it can also be hard. What's so amazing about it though, it that whenever we do spiritual work for ourselves, it also helps others. And when we work for collective liberation, it benefits us too. That's part of the joy of truly living in a community united by shared mind and purpose. We can't face the challenges of being a counter-cultural community unless we love each other well. We need each other to remember God's dreams and to live them out together.

So let's embrace this foolishness. Let's leave behind the nets of conventional wisdom. Let's choose the vulnerability that the Empire calls weakness. Let's follow

³ Federation, T. L. (2017). Pauline Hermeneutics – Exploring the 'Power of the Gospel'. Evangelische Verlagsanstalt Leipzig/Lutheran World Federation. <https://lutheranworld.org/resources/publication-pauline-hermeneutics-exploring-power-gospel>

the wandering preacher who brings those who are marginalized and despised to the center. For those of us being saved, this foolishness is the power of God. Amen.