

## "Looking Foolish"

Psalm 37:1-4; I Corinthians 1:18-25

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

January 31, 2016 – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany – Rev. Ronald Botts

We might look back today on an athlete like Jackie Robinson and think about the all-star qualities he had, both on and off the field. Yet, I don't think we can imagine just how difficult it was to be the first Black player in the major leagues. We can't know the full extent of the opposition he faced. Looking back in time now, perhaps no better man could have been destined for this role.

On one occasion, when the Brooklyn Dodgers were playing an away game, the crowd got on Robinson from the time he set foot on the field. It was a hot day, and the more beer that was consumed, the more surly those home fans became. Their taunts and derisive language were apparent to everyone, most especially to the visiting team.

After this name calling went on for several innings, one of Robinson's teammates—shortstop Pee Wee Reese—called time out. Reese walked over to his first baseman, put his arm around his shoulder, and stood there quietly. It was a wordless, but powerful, message to the crowd. It said this man is my teammate my friend, my brother.

Now if it was a foolish thing for Robinson to think he could play on a par with white athletes, it was equally foolish for Reese to befriend himself with someone who was the object of so much derision and hate. All I can say looking back is thank goodness for such fools.

Paul in his letter to the church at Corinth also has something to say about wisdom and foolishness:

"Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world'? For since ... the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. We proclaim Christ crucified .... For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's strength is stronger than human strength."

What a strange and unexpected way God chose to be revealed. Jesus was not the powerful figure that most were expecting in the promised Messiah. He had no similarity to earthly kings with their legions of soldiers, to their riches and finery. Yet, he truly was the Awaited One of God.

In the eyes of the world, the cross was a symbol of weakness and futility, of temporal power prevailing over spiritual power, but the might of God is measured by a far different standard. Worldly wisdom and Godly wisdom are two quite separate things.

If that isn't so, says Paul, then how would you account for God's using him as an instrument in divine purpose? Who would be less likely to be used as an apostle for Jesus than one who had sought out and persecuted Christ's followers? Yet here he stood and, for some inexplicable reason, God had entrusted this evangelizing mission to him. It was utter foolishness, or so it would seem.

Look at yourselves, Paul challenges those in the Corinthian church. Look at yourselves. Consider what it means that you have been chosen by God for a special mission. Would you have ever thought that such a task would be entrusted to you?

From what we know about this congregation it was made up primarily of the poor, uneducated, and marginalized. Some of its members were likely even slaves. What a joke it would seem for them, of all people, to be this holy witness in Corinth. Again, conventional wisdom is defied. The mantle of leadership is placed squarely on them.

In God's Kingdom everything appears to be upside-down. In God's Kingdom the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. In God's Kingdom children will be an example of trust that will be a model for their parents. In God's Kingdom meekness and humility will be characteristic of followers, rather than those who boast in their pride. In God's Kingdom riches mean nothing when it comes to what is ultimately important.

Those in society who are considered to be in the know, those who are thought to be so smart, are confounded because everything in this faith movement is so illogical. And that's the whole point, Paul says. One can't come to a new closeness with God by an effort on our part, as is commonly thought, but the gap has narrowed because God chose instead to come to us. Christ is the bridge between divinity and humanity. Believers have power, but it is God-given and not of our own doing. Who would have thought that this would be the way that this is how our saving grace would come?

Ever since those earthly days of Jesus word has spread far and wide about a whole new way of believing and living. It has gone through all following generations and to every corner of the earth. It has been the truth, the way, and the life to countless men and women; yet, there have always been those who are resistive.

For some, this kind of faith asks too much. These individuals are satisfied with a partial life. They are not willing to make sacrifices for deferred gain. They are unconcerned about eternity and live only for now. For others, this kind of faith makes no sense. It's not the way any self-respecting God would plan things. It's illogical and requires a leap from the provable to the fanciful. They may be concerned about eternity, but only so far as how they get there on their own terms. And yet another category of people understand what is offered, but they reject it. They consciously choose to follow expediency for the short-term gains that it promises. They live for today because that is the only reality they can understand. Life revolves solely around them.

Then there are all those who have found God in Christ. They accepted the way shown through Jesus and gratefully became believers and doers. They followed in the line of the first disciples and they have extended that heritage down to us today. They are our spiritual fathers and mothers. The last links in that chain before us we may have known as our grandparents and parents, teachers and pastors, neighbors and friends. They have helped to bring us to where we are today.

Now maybe some people think you're a bit crazy for going to church. They may not say it in so many words, but you get the message. To them there are so many better things to do with your time, your dedication, your money than to put it here. Well, you see their point. From the world's view, you pay money to work. You volunteer for the privilege of helping others. You

get up early on Sunday mornings for the opportunity to gather to sing and pray. It's all so senseless when you don't know Christ, but not for those who do.

The truth is that each one of us here has been chosen by God to be a bearer of the Kingdom. You have abilities and attributes that God is using to further its presence in the world. Yes, I may only be a small part.. but I am a part. I give back even as I receive. In losing my baser self I find my higher self. The very same holds true for you.

Our accompanying Psalm reading for this morning, and its following verses, reminds us that we shouldn't be concerned over the relative prosperity of some non-believers. We shouldn't be suckered into thinking that they are better off than we are, despite what it may seem on the surface.

"Do not fret," the psalm says. over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices ... for they will soon fade like the grass. [But] trust in the Lord and do good, take delight in the Lord, commit your way to the Lord ... and [you will] enjoy security. [The Lord] will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday. [Therefore] refrain from anger and don't fret, for the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land ... and delight themselves in abundant prosperity."

In other words, don't get upset with how well off others seem to be who do not recognize Christ. Don't be envious of what they appear to have without the sacrifices you may make. God will ultimately settle with everyone, and each will get his or her due. Be assured that in the end the faithful will be the ones to prosper.

In the divine order it is a privilege to serve; it is a joy to give back; it is an honor to witness. Yes, even to be a fool in the world's eyes, provides us an opportunity to stand with Christ. The true saints today are not afraid to be regarded as dreamers. They don't want to look foolish when out of step with much of the world, but they never let such characterization define them.

As we conclude this month where we celebrate the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr. we are again reminded to take seriously God's intention that we all live as one. The world says that's a foolish notion, that it can never be. The world says that the value of people somehow has to do with the pigmentation of their skin. The world says that it's alright to demean or discriminate against those who look different from you.

Well, I say let's be fools in regard to this and all of life. Let's deny the world's wisdom and affirm God's wisdom. Let's stand, in any way we can, for the principles contained within our faith. Let's find ways to break down the walls of intolerance and the barriers of privilege, that we might better come to know each other as common children of God.

Our scriptures for today remind us that wisdom is relative to its source. When God, expressed through Jesus, is our basis for understanding then this can be trusted. The truly wise person is one who see the difference between divergent voices and then chooses accordingly. It's then that looking foolish is not something to be avoided when it is a sign of faithfulness.