

Chrism Mass Sermon II 2017

We who are called as ordained leaders of the Church have a difficult sales job every day of the year, but especially during this time of Holy Week and Easter. We are bearers of the God's Great Narrative of Redemption, namely, that God in Christ is reconciling the world through the cross of Jesus. So, we stand, week in and week out, with our people bearing that narrative.

But what makes it such a difficult sales job is this: When this Great Narrative is told truthfully and rightly, many people really don't want to buy it. Now, they may want to buy a watered-down version of this Great Narrative of Redemption, but the full-throated version is too scandalous to accept because the price is too high. To buy it, they must accept the truth that God acts like a fool. For who but a fool would preemptively forgive the sins of humanity. Who wants a foolish God or to have faith in such a God? We Americans prefer a more muscular god, a god who endorses our sense of exceptionalism; that we're God's chosen. We want a god who would never do anything we wouldn't do, a god who baptizes our narrow-minded prejudices and serves up convenient enemies to justify our self-righteousness.

And when many of our people come to us for help and guidance, they've often already decided what they want from us. It might be \$50 for a bus ticket home. It might be to tell them that they're right and their spouse is all wrong. It might be that they want to hear that we agree with their view of the world. Or, it might be as mundane as this and say something like this: "Mrs. Jones never should've moved the former rector's picture out of the parish hall. If you were doing your job, you'd go and tell her that!" People come to us with the answer to their questions or problems often already formulated in their heads. What they want is for us to do is agree with them, do what they want, and then baptize that answer as the way of Jesus.

But then we put a fly in the ointment, don't we? We suggest maybe that they need to look at their own lives and actions. We point out their prayer life needs to be more consistent; or that maybe they need to work on forgiveness themselves and not insist it's only what others need to do.

In other words, in some ways, we don't help them at all. We are wrongly labeled as members of the so-called "helping profession." We mess with people. We mess with their lives and we mess with their families. Is it any wonder that some of our parishioners really don't like us?

We must be clear if we're going to thrive in ministry: We aren't really about helping people in the way they often expect. What we're about in our ordained vocations is the great Good News of Jesus' reconciling cross. But that makes our vocation, if not impossible, at least very challenging. Sometimes we will be out in front of our people urging them along. At other times, we will be behind them nudging them forward. And at even other times, we will be walking alongside them as their companion in the way.

So, we bear this Great Narrative like a woman who is two weeks late giving birth. We preach it and we teach it, knowing full well that it's a tough sell, or as St Paul reminds us: it's just a bunch of foolishness. He writes: *For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

We bear the stigmatized marks of this foolishness when we live our vocations truthfully and rightly. It costs us dearly to do so.

One of the great bishops of our Diocese, Albert Rhett Stuart went on the radio in the early 1960s and said that all the churches in the Diocese were open to all people. Many people told him he was a fool to do so. But all he knew was that he had to take up his cross and follow Jesus. We thank God because he chose to follow God's foolishness. As St Paul writes: *God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

This Great Narrative of Redemption binds you and me together in our ordinations. We're fools for Christ's sake, telling people the truth that God, because of Jesus, loves and forgives them no matter what. We must never forget that. That's what St Paul wanted the Corinthian Church to remember. That's why in his letter he spends the whole 1st chapter reminding them about God's essential nature: how *God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom* and *God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

St Paul tells them that what we proclaim seems like nothing more than a bunch of foolishness to others. And he warns them to hold on to the Gospel and to hold on to one another, because St Paul understood that the greatest threat to the Church is internal rather than external. There's no power outside this Church that can harm us. But inside the Church, we can harm one another. The Corinthian Church fell into factionalism. St Paul writes: *I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me...that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.*

They fought and argued with one another and almost forgot that they had been bound together by God's grace for a purpose.

We mustn't forget that you and I have been bound together by God's grace for the purpose bearing the Great Narrative of God's foolishness. God's Great Narrative of redemption defines our central mission as the Church of Jesus Christ. And God has so designed the Church that we can only proclaim God's Great Narrative through the frail, sinful instrumentality of one another. Now we can question God's wisdom for entrusting such a mission to the likes of us, but nevertheless God has done so. We're stewards of God's foolishness.

God requires a great deal from us as stewards of Great Narrative of God's foolishness. As stewards, we have to hold in tension what may seem to be contradictory virtues. On one hand, we must have the virtue of boldness. We must be bold enough to have something of a "I-know-something-you-don't-know" attitude when we're around those who don't embrace the Gospel. We must be bold enough to tell them unapologetically the truth of God's reconciling cross. But we also must do so with great humility, recognizing that we're always, as Martin Luther said, just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. The virtues of boldness and humility will reveal us as stewards of God's foolishness.

Living into our vocations will continue to be nothing other than counter-cultural. It's an impossible vocation we have. But we're just the fools to do it. I continue to be honored to serve with you, my fellow fools.