

Fools for Christ

I Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC in Camden; February 2, 2020

Paul calls the message of the cross a blessed foolishness that undercuts ways of imagining and relating to God that are not transformative. One of those ways is to rationally think our way to the divine and remain at the level of ideas. Another is to make our faith in God dependent on outcomes based on transactional models of relating to God (i.e. if I do this action, it will have that result). Based on his own cultural context, Paul equates these two models with Greek philosophical wisdom and Jewish seeking for “signs.” Of course, both traditions are far more complex than this and by no means represent that simple an equation, especially today. Quite frankly, we are just as much in danger as people of the past to be stuck in these models.

Rather than getting into a detailed discussion of those complexities, I would like to just point our attention to the uniqueness that Paul perceives in Christ’s story of dying and rising. For him, it is our guiding story for understanding how God defines wisdom, weakness, strength, and offers a pathway to healing and wholeness. It is an experientially and relationally transformative story, not one of speculation or transaction. I would also like to connect Paul’s insight at least briefly to some of the Beatitudes. Rather than offering abstract descriptions, I will tell a real-life story to illustrate. It is told in the movie “The Best of Enemies” (check CPL).

It is 1971 in Durham, NC. Ann Atwater is a mover and shaker in the African-American community. Her people are fighting substandard housing, high rents, unequal education, and constant humiliation. Ann runs *Operation Breakthrough* and advocates tirelessly, while also raising her daughter as a single mom. Ann, also known as ‘rough house Annie,’ does not take ‘no’ for an answer without a fight. When her daughter’s elementary school is damaged by fire, leaving all but the gym and 2-3 rooms half-way intact, Ann leads the charge to address the situation. When the all-white male city council refuses to let African-American children finish the school year in a white school, the NAACP offers to get involved and files suit on behalf of the black parents. The higher-level judge in charge decides to get an African-American mediator named Reddick involved who is known for running so called *Charrettes* successfully (a carefully crafted mediation process) further north.

The mere suggestion of a mediation process is an outrage to the white power brokers in town. It's a *charade* to them but the judge's order has to be obeyed. The Charrette process involves a black and a white co-chair, each representing their communities. Ten additional "senators" are selected by lottery from a pool of people who are not officially taking part in any of the more extreme organizing bodies on either side. They form the steering committee/senate with equal numbers of blacks and whites, men and women. For ten days, the whole community meets in plenaries and break out groups to raise relevant issues and come up with resolutions. It is up to the senators to vote on them, requiring a 2/3 majority vote (8-4 minimum) for passage of a resolution. All parties are bound by the vote.

White leaders begin to lean on CP Ellis to be their main representative. CP leads the local chapter of the KKK. He runs a gas station in town. One of his four kids is struggling in school, like he himself used to, and his son Larry is institutionalized with developmental and cognitive challenges. When CP is reluctant to participate, a KKK member reminds him of their saying: "Failure to know the enemy gives them aid and comfort." It will be up to CP to get to know the enemy better and make sure the process is not run by some white liberals. Even the mediator knows that he needs CP involved and that he needs Ann. She only agrees to co-chair when the alternative on her side would have been a well-educated middle-class black man she assumes does not know what poor black people are really going through. Despite their inclinations, Ann and CP become reluctant partners in a process and with a mediator neither fully trusts.

The listening sessions begin revealing that black students are at least a year behind and do not even have adequate text books. This only increases fear among white parents that their children will struggle to succeed in school if black students attend as well. The debates are spirited and partisan. However, at lunch time, everyone is required to sit at a predesignated mixed-race table. No talk about the resolutions is allowed. CP and Ann have a table to themselves! At the end of the first day, an African-American pastor suggests singing some Gospel music but white people object calling it the "N" word music. When the mediator asks how white folks want to represent their tradition, CP chimes in that they will put up an information table featuring the clan's message, including their hoods.

The display evokes such hurt and anger that Ann almost leaves the process. But when some young black students try to destroy the display, it is Ann who intervenes and tells them to use it as a chance to get educated about those who wish to destroy them. CP overhears the exchange. Ann challenges him directly on his demand for the display and reminds him of their shared Christian faith. She shows him her Bible and says: "CP, the same God that made you also made me. Remember that!"

The whole time the community discussions are under way, CP and white leaders are at work trying to figure out their odds for voting down resolutions given the chosen white senators. One of the questionable white representatives/senators is the owner of a hardware store with black employees, including the manager. Another is a young nurse who is known for her open-heartedness. CP only backs off from bothering the Hardware store owner when the man shares that he and his manager served two tours in Vietnam together. When Ellis says, "I respect you for your service to our country and won't bother you," the owner replies, "My manager is named Bennett and he was braver than I was. CP, he served our country too."

As the days go by, Ann is starting to see the humanity in CP, especially when his son has a break-down in the clinic after getting a very agitated roommate. CP cannot afford a private room and feels angered and helpless. At first unbeknownst to him, it is Ann who pulls all her strings and connections to get Larry into a quiet space again. CP is both angry and grateful for her interference. CP's eyes begin to open further when the mediator takes the steering committee on a field trip. It is the last day of deliberations and they tour the school that was damaged by fire. By now, white kids are enjoying the summer vacation. CP is surprised to find students and teachers at the black school. Because of the loss of space due to fire damage, the school has to run in shifts to accommodate all students. This has led to less instruction time and more days to attend. When Ann introduces her daughter to CP, the daughter stares at him and doesn't know what to say. CP later tells his wife, "She looked at me like I was a monster. I am just trying to do right. First they integrated restaurants, then playgrounds. Schools are the one thing we got left to fight for." His wife hugs him and asks, "Who will you fight when that is done?"

As the day for the vote nears, the intimidation of potential white swing voters on the senate is ramped up without CP's knowledge. The hardware store owner has his business shut down for a supposed code violation. The young nurse is (sexually) harassed by a clansman waiting for her in her home. She tries to get out of her voting role and Ann knows something is wrong. Ann accuses CP of meddling and tells him what a fool he is not to recognize that they are both poor and struggling to live a decent life, having more in common than they think. CP's attempts to stop the intimidation are met with cynical justifications and a surprise celebration of his efforts of creating a KKK youth corps. CP is named "Distinguished Cyclops of the year 1971" but what would have been a source of pride no longer feels quite right.

On the night of the actual *charrette* vote, three resolutions are presented requiring a 2/3 approval by the senators to pass. Two smaller resolutions¹ pass by the needed 8-4 margin. When it comes to the resolution for full school integration, the nurse gives in to her intimidation and votes no. The process actually comes down to CP's vote. He goes up to the mic and is silent for a long time. Then he pulls out his KKK membership card. "I got this 12 years ago and I cried when I got it. That was the first time I did not feel alone as a man who is struggling to provide for his family. I felt like I was part of something, a real brotherhood and that it is. We look out for each other and no one is left behind. Our motto is "not for oneself but for the other." See, now I have a problem because that is only meant for white people but I have been watching people serving each other in this room this week. I am supposed to hate blacks and have taught that black people are inferior. So, if I don't believe that, I can't be president of the clan. I don't believe that anymore and I don't need this card anymore." The CP rips his membership card apart and says, "I vote 'yes' for school integration." The room erupts in both consternation and exultation.

Two days later, one of the pumps at CP's gas station is sabotaged. Not even a single one of his previously "whites only" customers has come to get gas. Then the mediator and Ann drive up. CP teases Ann about what trouble she is planning to stir up next. Ann smiles and says, "We know what's happened but maybe business will pick up again." Just then, a parade of cars with

¹ One calling for a black and a white student to serve on the school board and a resolution to pay for summer classes so black students can catch up.

black drivers starts to come down the street – all destined for CP’s gas station. “That’s just what I do, CP,” Ann says. Ann and CP became and remained friends for over 30 years. They toured many communities and universities to share their story, including the message that one always pays a price for change but that it’s worth it. When CP died, it was Ann who gave his eulogy.

Thanks be to God for people like Ann and CP who are willing to become fools for Christ. Gradually, each let go of concepts and assumptions about each other. They did not follow conventional wisdom about the safety of hating each other. They did not just settle for a transaction of “I give you this if you give me that.” Their relationship grew gradually through the hard and slow process of seeing beyond the veil of hate and suspicion. They were handed a lens to look into the suffering of the other and did not avert their eyes. They both exposed themselves to potential ridicule and opposition by crossing boundaries and broadening horizons. They stuck with a process that meant dying to old assumptions and rising to new possibilities. They mirrored that “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Corinthians 1:27), to quote Paul.

By the same token, they were blessed because they were willing to be poor in spirit through their growing humility and openness of heart. There was a hunger and a thirst for righteousness that filled them with new possibility and transformed relationships. There was a mercy that carried them through. They shared enough of a glimmer of the purity of heart to see the world as diverse and blessed as God intended it for us. Together, they served as children of God by their peacemaking even though it came at a cost. Theirs was the “the kingdom of heaven.”

May we also dare to seek actual transformation in our relationships rather than mere rational assent to ideas. May we not settle for transactional relationships with God and each other based on “you owe me.” God has so much more in store for us if we but learn to be foolish in Christ’s way, risking a deeper plunge into the ocean of compassion, mercy and love.