

TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
March 21, 1989 - 9:00 a.m.
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"FOOLS ... FOR CHRIST'S SAKE!"

"For the word of God is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us... it is the power of God." I Cor. 1:18f

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." John 12:24f

By the standards of the world - being here this morning is pure foolishness. The numbers tell the story of wisdom in this world. And the world says ... it's pretty foolish to be in a sanctuary with _____ other people. Now if Vanna White or Dan Quale were to be featured here this morning - then there might be some wisdom in being here. But to be here to worship God ... to praise and thank Christ for his life?? That's real foolishness. By worldly standards, many of you would have been far better off to have finished the laundry ... or run the errands, right? The world says about our little gathering is a lot of Holy Week foolishness. Wait for Easter Sunday -- that's when everyone makes a religious appearance. But during Holy Week - that's only for fools ... fools for Christ's sake!!

That's been the way of this Christian business for a long time. Erasmus in The Praise of Folly poked all kinds of fun at the content of the gospels. He alludes to Jesus Christ, who instead of meeting with intellectuals and philosophers, took his greatest delight in children, women, and fisherman ... hardly the elite of society. Jesus preferred to ride on a donkey into Jerusalem; he would have been far more impressive mounted on a lion. The Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove; why not an eagle or a hawk? Jesus calls his faithful followers "sheep" -- when everyone knows there is no animal more stupid. Christ even takes delight in being called the "Lamb of God."

By all worldly standards of sophistication and prominence, Christians are really perceived as fools. I've told some of you my story of foolishness. In my second parish, a very prominent corporate lawyer moved from Troy to L.A. He invited Sue and me to L.A. for the Rose Bowl. After a delicious meal and several glasses of wine in his home, he finally leveled with me. He said: "Peter, why don't you make something of yourself and get out of the ministry; parish ministry has no real significance and meaning in this world ... there are no real rewards for your talents; you're wasting your life in ministry -- it's pure foolishness."

There are times that all of us -- esp. we professional servants -- really identify with that lawyer. Christian servanthood is fraught with demands and many times futile of tangible rewards. As St. Paul said, we are often beaten, mocked, ridiculed, laughed at, even persecuted -- yet even in the same breath we are to bless, to endure, to love, to conciliate, to honor, and to be holy in all our words and deeds.

Is it any wonder that the world says, "that's a lot of foolishness!"

But "foolishness" to whom? to what? What is really meant by Christian foolishness? What do we really mean when we say we are "fools for Christ's sake?" Here the correlary passage from the gospel of John offers a powerful image and insight. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

A grain of wheat has no value to anyone or itself if it remains preserved, safe and secure as a grain. It is only of value as it loses itself in the earth; as it dies in the earth it begins to have potential to become something greater. True greatness ... true glory only comes with the foolishness of self-surrender ... self-giving ... death to self!

Take any field of life and begin to reflect upon its fruits of greatness and glory. Without exception, the truly great ones are those who surrendered themselves to the foolishness of SELF-GIVING ... SACRIFICIAL LIVING. Those "fools" who have died for a greater cause than self are the ones whom we glorify in our hearts and minds. America honors Martin Luther King Jr. with a permanent calendar notch because King lived out the "foolishness of Holy Week." Why is it that Americans still get lumps in their throats for those who forgot personal safety, personal security, forgot selfish gain and selfish advancement in the conflicts of this country? We glorify those Americans because they "lived out the foolishness of Holy Week."

Yes, when all is said and done -- the world still owes its greatest debt to those who have recklessly spent their strength and gave themselves to God and others. That's why we're here this morning -- because that's the character and life of Holy Week. Holy Week does not give a damn about what the world thinks, but it does give the greatest glory to what Christ has done. The world thinks that the real Messiahs are those who conquer with power and acquire with might. THIS HAS BECOME THE WISDOM AND STRENGTH OF THE WORLD -- GET ALL YOU CAN GET WITH GUSTO.

Over and against this mindset came Jesus Christ. He did not enter this world to overpower anyone or get anything; his mission was to give ... his conquest was in spending his life on a cross. An early evangelist summed up the life of a fool for Christ as follows: "It is better to burn out than to rust out!"

Millions today prefer the wisdom of the Greeks -- they would rather "rust out with all their stuff." But such people are not GIVERS -- they are the "getters of this world." Their mission is one of getting, not giving. Likewise, these people are not the "lovers" of the world; they are best known as the "leaches" of this world.

As for me and mine -- I will be a fool with Christ. I will take and eat ... and take and drink ... because there is no greater foolishness than giving others the love of Christ. For after all -- it's the only way that God's true potential can be glorified in each of us for the world!!

HOLY TUESDAY - 1991
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
March 26, 1991
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

I Corinthians 1: 18-25
John 12: 20-29

Our gospel text today begins with a group of Greeks (Gentiles like ourselves) coming to another Greek, Philip, and asking: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Have we not come here for this same reason today?? The motivation for Gentiles has not changed for some 2000 years -- whether Holy Week, or Pentecost, or Christmas - each time we enter this sacred place, we are asking: "We wish to see Jesus."

We come seeking some new sign; some new truth, some new revelation. As our Corinthian text indicates: the Jews were seeking similar signs (miraculous powers); and the Greeks were desiring similar wisdom (sophisticated truth). And what is the sign and the wisdom that Jesus offers: he points to his own death. He says: "He who loves his love must lose his life." You can imagine how that answer grabbed the Jews and the Greeks!

Instead of giving some miraculous expression of overwhelming power to the Jews, he gives them a human paradox: LOSE YOUR LIFE TO GAIN YOUR LIFE. That's hardly the kind of power that the Jews were looking for. And instead of sophisticated wisdom for the Greeks, he gives them foolishness: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone - it must die to itself before it has any real value. Self-sacrifice is hardly the kind of sophistication that the Greeks were seeking.

As Pastor Silleck said yesterday, so often those coming to see Jesus, just like the Jews & Greeks, are showing up with a pre-occupation with themselves. Tragically, but truly, that is far too often the same motivation for many of us in the church. Some come to see Jesus in this place for their own self-gratification (they only come to get); others are motivated for self-justification (they want to be seen for their own righteousness); still others feel that seeing Jesus is the way to worldly success (they come to get a little Jesus, and then expect their lives to be full of glory & success).

In fact, that's why many of us pastors have strong reservations about the evangelists of the church growth movement these days: THEY SEEM TO SEEK NOTHING BUT SUCCESS AND SELF-GRATIFICATION. They are pre-occupied with growth for the sake of being bigger and the best by worldly standards. You haven't really made it until you have your crystal cathedral; you aren't anything until you've got it all! They define ministry as growth in numbers, growth in dollars, and growth in buildings. Obviously, Jesus wasn't opposed to this kind of "success." But when people really want to see Jesus, they won't find him telling the successful strategies for building bigger budgets. In fact, his story would probably be viewed as a real failure: TO LOSE YOUR LIFE IS THE WAY YOU FIND YOUR LIFE. In short, you "succeed" by surrendering and sacrificing!

Yes, when we come to this place "wishing to see Jesus," we find a Jesus who distinguishes between "success" stories and "fruitful" fulfillments.

Fruitfulness has to do with being a blessing to others. Success deals with getting and taking and accumulating things. Fruitfulness focuses upon persons and relationships. Success measures quantities and possessions and principalities of worldly power. Fruitfulness extends beyond this time and this place. Success is only concerned about the here and now! That's why Jesus says: "she who hates her life in this world will keep it for eternal life -- "hate" here meaning instead of a pre-occupation with self, a predisposition toward serving others.

Let me illustrate with one recent story. In Florida last year a father drowned while saving the lives of his children. While swimming in the ocean near Jacksonville with his three children, he saw them starting to float away. He tried to gather them in; as he was shoving them toward the shore, the undertow caught him and carried him out to sea where he drowned. The children survived, but he lost his life in saving them. Had he saved his own life and allowed the kids to drown, he would have been MORTIFIED - forever feeling that he had miserably failed in life. Instead he lost his life, but in so losing he was GLORIFIED ... because his life stood for more than self-preservation. Eternally, he will be remembered as one who was not pre-occupied with saving his own life.

When we come to really see Jesus, that's the kind of foolishness that he shows us. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men." Albert Einstein said it this way: "Do not try to be a wise man, a man of success - successful men always take more out of life than they give back to it; instead, be a person of value - people of value give more to others than they take for themselves.

So it is that we have come again to this same place asking: "We wish to see Jesus." And what do we see? We first see the human nature of Jesus praying: "Father, save me from this hour." But then even more graphically, we hear the divine nature of Christ responding: "No, for this purpose I have come to this hour." When we see Jesus, we always see that the needs of others take precedence over his pre-occupation with his own comfort or success. He always puts you and me before himself.

Is it any wonder that when we really see Jesus, we begin to become less pre-occupied with ourselves and more concerned about loving others?? And isn't that the purpose for which we have come here in the first place -- not to see our own glory, but to see the glory of the life of Christ for us and in us!?

AMEN.

HOLY TUESDAY
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
April 6, 1993
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God." I. Cor.1:18 "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." John 12:25

How many of you were winners last night?? Some of you probably don't even know what I'm talking about. You are probably the real winners - because you have not become addicted to national companionships. But just for the record, North Carolina beat Michigan: 77 to 71.

I doubt that I need to remind you that WINNING has truly become the wisdom of this world. Is it any wonder that St. Paul says "the word of the cross is folly to the majority of us perishing in this world." The wisdom of the world sees the cross as a stupid, impotent, morbid symbol of defeat. The world sees WINNING as the only way to success and salvation. And so what happens when someone loses?? We can't cope with losing. Chris Webber said that when the Woverines lost to Duke last year -- he spewed profanities all night and wouldn't even shake the hands of the Dookies. Is it any wonder there is so much anger, insanity, hurtfulness and violence in this world?? We can't stand losing!! So like Chris Webber - when we lose we spew profanities, or we gun the other guy down, or we get depressed and go off the deep end!

After Webber realized he had totally embarrassed his parents, he went on to say that the loss to Duke last year "was the ugliest moment of his life. For the first time he realized that God always puts challenges in front of us ... and just because we say our prayers or go to church doesn't mean we're always going to WIN."

I hope Webber never forgets his own wisdom! I hope he didn't forget that wisdom last night! Regretably, the majority of people today are looking at Webber's wisdom as a lot of folly: THEY MAINTAIN YOU MUST WIN AT ALL COSTS! And that "wisdom" has not only infected the secular world; it is fast becoming the "way, the truth, and the life" of the fastest growing churches in our country (as reflected in the latest Time). Today's church wisdom is called "supply-side spirituality" - marketing the church not by the WAY or TRUTH of Christ, but by the WANTS of the consumers. In short, the strategy is: GIVE THEM WHATEVER THEY WANT, AS LONG AS IT MAKES YOU A BIGGER WINNER! As Lutheran historian Martin Marty summarized re: this so-called truth: "No God or religion or spirituality; no issue of truth or beauty or goodness; no faith or hope or

love; no justice or mercy; only WINNING (OR LOSING) in this church matters." Certainly every church must be sensitive to the needs and concerns of its members. But when the members "WANTS" become the basic theological premise for the church's existence & mission - then Christ is no longer at the center, then the cross has been lost, and then the church deserves to LOSE, AND LOSE BIG!!

But as all of you well know -- there are many leaders, companies, congregations, pastors, bishops, and esp. academic institutions today (both on the court and off the court) that live by this WAY OF WINNING -- "win at any cost, no matter how many you hurt, devastate, or divide the people or the community around you.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus never said: "he who always WANTS TO WIN will receive the crown of eternal life!" Quite to the contrary, Jesus said: "He/she who loses his life for my sake will truly be the winner!"

The foolishness of God is that only those who are willing to surrender, to sacrifice, to graciously lose, to give the shirts of their backs, to lay down their lives for others -- only these are the true winners. We have all known those situations where we have had to TOTALLY KEEP OUR MOUTHS SHUT IN ORDER FOR THE GOOD OF THE WHOLE FAMILY OR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY. That's the only way to become a LASTING WINNER -- in being willing to sacrifice for the greater good of the whole body.

That's the winning philosophy of Jesus Christ. He lost it all -- not for the sake of losing, but for the sake of showing that true winners GIVE THE GIFT OF LIFE TO OTHERS. And there have been many winners like him ever since: St. Francis of Assisi; St. Augustine; St. Peter; St. Paul; Martin Luther; Pope John 23; Martin Luther King; Mahatma Ghandi; Madame Curie; Mother Teresa; etc. In fact, you are here tonite because you have come to again confirm the true meaning of being a WINNER: YOU ARE HERE TO AGAIN SHOW YOUR WILLINGNESS TO LOSE YOUR LIFE FOR CHRIST'S SAKE! May God continue to bless you with his kind of foolish YET VICTORIOUS, "winning" spirit!

AMEN.