

DIVINE FOLLY

MICAH 6:1-9; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31; MATTHEW 5:1-12

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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On Friday morning over breakfast, I was talking with Naomi and sort of lamenting the fact that I was struggling to write my sermon this week.

She asked me what the texts were.

“That’s the thing,” I told her. This week’s texts are amazing. Like some of my favourites in the whole Bible. Or at least some of the texts that I think *should* be my favourites, because they get right at the heart of what it means to live as a follower of Jesus.

We just heard one of them from 1 Corinthians, the letter from Paul that we’ve been looking at for the last two weeks. This marvelous passage that summarizes so much of what we believe about Christ and his kingdom.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

But I want to read a few portions of some of the other assigned readings for this week that we didn’t hear.

The OT reading comes from the prophet Micah:

8 He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

The gospel text is the words of Jesus, from Matthew 5:

Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

These are inspiring texts! Difficult and challenging, to be sure, but they encapsulate so much of what it means to live lives of committed, transformative, counter-cultural discipleship.

Together, they give a picture of life where all of the assumptions about how the world works and how human lives ought to be lived are turned upside down in imitation of Jesus and in embrace of his kingdom.

Getting to speak on texts like these should be like Christmas morning for preachers! It's the equivalent of a nice easy pitch being thrown down the middle of the plate! This one should be easy. Right?

Wrong.

I didn't know where to begin! It felt like there was too much to say. Or maybe that I would say too much. Maybe the best thing to do would be to just read these three passages and sit with them in silence for twenty minutes!

"What's the first thing that comes into your mind when you think of these passages?" Naomi asked.

I thought about it for a second and then answered, "Well, the first thing that comes to mind is that so much of what I see in the world out there looks *nothing like this!* Indeed, it often looks like the *opposite* of this."

This past week has offered particularly stark reminders.

We have seen the most powerful position in the world being occupied by a man whose behaviour and language and, increasingly, policies seem to embody very little mercy or meekness, or interest in making peace. A man who regularly manufactures "alternative facts" to suit the actions he wishes to take, and who generally seems determined to steer his nation (and, by extension, the world) according to policies and rhetoric and actions that are diametrically opposed to the vision held out to us by Christ.

We continue see in our public discourse a shocking *lack* of humility or righteousness or purity, and a love of justice that is very often self-serving and selective.

We see an online culture being cultivated where people will increasingly do anything to be noticed, to stand out, to make their mark, and where we are increasingly conditioned to evaluate ourselves based on whether we are praised or shamed by the noisy mob.

We see a bloated entertainment industry dominated by power and sex and violence, where the violent bad guys are always defeated the violent good guys, and into which we collectively pour billions of dollars every year, while so many people around the world continue to lack basic necessities, while charitable hovers somewhere around 2%.

(And we are surprised when the living embodiment of an addiction to power, violence, and sex ascends to the highest office in the land.)

In short, we see a steady dose of the opposites of the virtues and the general approach to life that is set forth in our texts today

Of course, we must always remember that the sensational and the awful always floats to the top and makes the headlines that form our views of the world, but all in all many of us look at the world in 2017 and things seem rather bleak.

So what should we make of this? Well, the first thing we might do is get our categories straight with a few questions.

Why ought we expect presidents and nations to behave according to the imperatives of the kingdom of God? Why should we expect the world to praise or embrace these countercultural ideals of weakness as strength, foolishness as wisdom?

The world is not the church. The kingdoms of men are not the kingdom of God. These were among the most important insights of the first Anabaptists.

Paul makes this point a few chapters on in 1 Corinthians 5:

What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside.

We should never expect those who do not embrace the way of Christ to play by his rules. As Christians, we should probably not be shocked when the world acts in worldly ways.

It has ever been thus.

But speaking of Christians, speaking of the church... how are *we* doing with this foolish vision, this foolish hope, this foolish task that we claim is ours?

My impression is that the divine folly that we are called to live in imitation of is very often something that we *admire*, but not as often something that we embrace in practice.

Let's start with Micah...

Do justly: We are committed to justice, but often in a highly selective way. I saw a Franklin Graham post yesterday on Holocaust Memorial Day that linked resistance to Hitler with pursuing justice for the unborn in an anti-abortion march. Mr. Graham seemed not to notice the irony of the fact that the president he supports signed into law this week policies that profiled people based on race and religion. His vision of justice had room for the unborn but not, it seems, for the refugee. And the same is true on the other side, as well. Many Christians are loud advocates for human rights around the world but have little or nothing to say about abortion.

Love mercy: We do love mercy. At least being on the receiving end of it. I know I do 😊. But here again I suspect that we love it selectively. Do we have mercy for the unloveable, the unlovely? Do we have mercy for those who offend or embarrass us?

Walk humbly: Humility is, it seems to me, among the most lacking virtues in the church today. As I mentioned last week, it grieves me to observe how often those in the church tear each other apart for not thinking right, believing right, acting right. Do we have mercy for those we would never be praised for showing mercy to?

And what about the Beatitudes?

How eager are we to be poor in spirit and to embrace meekness in a culture that rewards pride?

How ready are we to mourn in a culture determined to ignore death and exalt youth?

How hungry and thirsty are we for righteousness (as opposed to “rightness”)?

Is “purity” even on our radar or do we, with so many others, see this word as a relic from a bygone age?

Do our words and theology about peace go beyond just being words?

Are we willing to be thought poorly of or even persecuted for our convictions about Christ?

If you’re anything like me, once you do a bit of digging beneath the surface into your heart and mind, your motivations and dispositions, you come to the uncomfortable

conclusion that this upside-down and foolish way of being in the world is a lot easier to *admire* than to *practice*.

I want to be known as the kind of person who lives this way a lot more than I actually want to live this way.

It's easy to point at people like Trump and the ugly realities he represents. It's easy to offer ourselves a self-congratulatory pat on the back and say, "well, thank God we're not like that..."

But Jesus always demands that we hold up a mirror to ourselves first. And when we do, I think we see that we might pay lip service to the foolish way of Christ, but when it comes to how we live, well, it's a little too foolish to embrace.

So what do we do?

It's easy to despair at the state of the world and, upon closer inspection, the state of our own souls. But we can't stop there, for our own sakes or for the sake of the world.

It's worth reminding ourselves that our "foolish" hope is based on a very specific thing: Christ crucified.

This is what Paul proclaimed.

Paul didn't come up with the foolish way of Christ as a pragmatic political strategy to adopt for a struggling Corinthian church. He didn't sit around a boardroom table with his fellow church leaders and concoct this as an ideological framework or an alternative social policy.

Paul's proclamation was *only* a response to the cross of Christ. We are called to a life of holy foolishness because of the cross.

Because the cross turned everything upside down.

The cross showed a suffering God who ends suffering. A humiliated God who identifies with the humiliated and rejected. A foolish God who saves the world through his foolishness. A God who dies in order that we might live.

A defeated God who wins the ultimate victory.

And it is only because this foolishness was vindicated on Easter morning that any of us have any hope at all.

But even if we isolate the cross as our foundation, I think there are pitfalls waiting for us. It seems me that there are two errors to guard against.

The “conservative” error is to put the “foolishness of the cross” in our back pocket as a useful theological doctrine about what God did for human salvation, and then get on with the business of living in the world according to the “wisdom” of the world, pursuing power and influence, resorting to the politics of pragmatism inside and outside the church.

Here, the “foolishness of the cross” remains detached, theoretical, and abstract—something that God did for us but which requires little from us beyond believing in it.

The “liberal” error is to think that the “foolishness of the cross” refers *only* to a way of life devoted to prioritizing the lowly, the weak, the poor, without ever talking about the cross as a theological doctrine to be embraced. On this view, the cross was what Jesus got for living out the beatitudes, but not much more. It was the supreme example of self-sacrifice.

This leads to a kind of vague and sloppy liberalism that talks a lot about kindness and compassion and openness and tolerance but has no anchor in the solidity of the cross as God’s way of dealing decisively with unpleasant and universal and persistent realities like human sin.

In the first case, the foolishness of the cross is a doctrine to accept; in the second case, it is an ethical stance to adopt.

But of course the cross is both.

It is something to believe in, it is a victory over the dark forces that our world sees that has been accomplished on our behalf, something that we could never do on our own. It is the means by which we can be forgiven of our own sin. It is salvation.

And the cross propels us out into action, in imitation of our Saviour's upside down, foolish way of being in the world.

This, together, is the foolishness to which we are called.

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: 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, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

So let us go out into the world as holy fools.

As it has ever been, the world is in desperate need of our foolish king and his foolish kingdom.

Amen.

