***Jesus the Fool***

A Sermon preached at Lawrence Park Community Church

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Mark 6:1-6

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 In the village of Nazareth, they said, "It’s Jesus the carpenter. Can you believe it? You know the guy. He has that rusty white Dodge Caravan. He built my kitchen cabinets. You know who I mean.”

 They said, “His dad died from tetanus a few years back . . . left his wife Mary with seven or eight kids. Jesus is the eldest. Well, he thinks he's a preacher now. He's been over at the synagogue preaching. Rabbi put an end to that. Can you believe it? He never went to school a day in his life. His poor mother. As if she didn't have enough problems, already. Now her son thinks he’s a preacher."

 Jesus was a carpenter, and this is so much part of the fabric of our faith, we are so used to hearing it, that it doesn't startle us anymore. But it bugged the people who knew him best. They thought he was crazy.

 They said things like, "Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us? And they took offense at him.”

 And lest we forget, it wasn’t just the people of Nazareth, Jesus’ neighbours, who took offense. His own family thought he was nuts. In chapter three of Mark, when Jesus’ family heard he was attracting large crowds, they tried to restrain Jesus and drag him home. They thought he was out of his mind.

 We forget this. Two thousand years of telling the old, old story, of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love has made the story so familiar, so old-hat, that it doesn’t make us roll our eyes anymore.

 But the truth is, in his day, Jesus was widely considered a fool, a clown. Mostly it was because Jesus said the most outrageous things about the Kingdom of God. Jesus the clown said of the kingdom of God, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors." Instead, he advised: "when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you" (Luke 14.12-13). How dumb.

 Jesus said that in the kingdom of God a poor widow's pennies outweighed a rich man’s gold. Jesus said that in the kingdom of God children are closer to the kingdom of heaven than even apostles and saints. Jesus said that in the kingdom of God when people asked you to forgive them, you should. Jesus’ reputed miracles got people to talking, but so too did the fact that Jesus took tea with turncoat tax collectors; Jesus sat down to eat with prostitutes, forgave them, and sent their accusers away. Jesus spoke with Samaritans and even made one the hero of his most famous parable.

 Jesus didn’t make sense, his kingdom didn’t make sense, and yet there was something oddly divine about that, even if he was nuts. It’s like this.

 There was a Jew who lived long before Jesus was born. He was a poor man named Isaac, son of Aaron, who lived in exile, in a Jewish village outside of the mighty city of Babylon. One night, Isaac dreamed that in the city, under a bridge over the Euphrates river, there was a treasure box. Night after night Isaac dreamed the same dream.

 After two weeks, Isaac could stand it no more and so he walked to Babylon to seek this bridge. He easily found it, jumped in the water, and searched to see if the treasure was there. It wasn't. As he came out of the water, two Babylonian police nabbed him. They wanted to know what a Jew was doing in Babylon. Fearing the worst—torture or imprisonment--Isaac told them the truth, telling the police that he had been looking for treasure he had seen in his dreams.

 "You stupid Jew," the arresting officer shouted, "do you believe in dreams? I am too smart for such nonsense. Why for the last two weeks I myself have dreamed that in a little village outside the city there is a Jew by the name of Isaac son of Aaron, and that there is a treasure hidden under the stove in his kitchen. But do you see me wasting my time looking for this treasure? Ha. It’s a fool’s errand. I’m too smart for that."

 So, roaring with laughter, the two policemen threw Isaac son of Aaron into the street and said, "Go home, you idiot." So, Isaac, son of Aaron went home. Once there, he moved the stove in the kitchen, and found a treasure buried beneath it.

 Life in Jesus’ kingdom often seems about as sensible as living an impossible dream. Life in Jesus’ kingdom means following a fool who managed to make both the Roman oppressors and the oppressed mad at him, so that in the end even his closest friends abandoned him. To put it as delicately as possible, if you think about it, Jesus’ life was certainly not about following the wisdom of the status quo.

 And that is how it is, for us. The great enemy of the kingdom of God—of Jesus—in our age is not godlessness so much as matter-of-factness, not the spirit of some defiant antichrist so much as spiritlessness, not decline in numbers so much as a refusal to dream dreams.

 And, judging by Jesus’ standards, one of great dangers in the way of a future for the church must be that we begin thinking of ourselves as a collection of brilliantly fashionable people, or if not that, at least a collection of respectable, dependable, solid people who can merely be counted on to go along to get along rather than live by our foolish ideals.

 And so, we tend to overlook that it was not so for Jesus, that in fact, Jesus turned the lives of nearly everyone he met, friend or foe, upside down. This was because, in spite of everyone else’s insistence on keeping their noses clean and staying out of trouble, Jesus lived to make others whole; he spoke to give hope to the last, the least and the lost; he acted counterculturally to change the universe—if not in his lifetime; then perhaps in the lifetimes of his run-away followers, telling them by way of preparation, to do with their lives as he had done with his.

 We—or perhaps better say our children and grandchildren—need that kind of foolishness today, a madness that puts the environment ahead of excuses like, “I can’t make a difference by myself.” A rejection of worldly wisdom that that mocks not only Good Samaritans, but our own First Nations, heroes. We need the impudence to laugh at the decline of Christianity around the world while saying to each other, “here at LPCC we are going to grow our morning service and start an evening service, Soul Table, to boot—so that we can as believers and doubters make Toronto a better place than it already is.”

 Listen. I struggle, sometimes, with the New Testament. I doubt the newspaper truth of its miracle stories as much as I doubt the facts of Isaac’s dream of treasure. I turn away, disappointed and appalled, by the death of Jesus and wonder, uncomprehending, at stories of Jesus’ resurrection.

 But the bottom line, for me, is that in a world where pragmatism has earned us American trade sanctions on iron and aluminum; where party politics has given us scandals on the left and right and in the bureaucracy; where the pursuit of endless economic growth has given us a consumerism that can’t stop choking the oceans with plastic; in a world where the powers that be seem paralyzed to deal with climate change or the looming extinction of a tens of thousands of species; at a time when the leader of the free world is acknowledged by all and sundry, including the leaders of his own party to be a serial liar, a male predator, and religious hypocrite; in a world I feel powerless to make a global difference as a banker or mother or student or preacher; in such a world, I choose not to give up.

 I choose, instead, to be a fool for the fool Christ whenever and wherever I can. Because, in the end, as the Apostle Paul says, “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.”

 Believe in the dreams Jesus dreamed. Then you, like Isaac—or at least your children and grandchildren—might well live happily ever after, in spite of all.