

“Confirmation – Not Just For Kids, Part 3: The Foolishness of faith”

Sermon Preached by David D. Colby

Central Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Cultural critic Naomi Wolf recently wrote a review of three best-selling series of novels for teenage girls called “Clique,” “Gossip Girl” and “A-List.” She writes,

While the tacky sex scenes in them are annoying, they aren’t really the problem. The problem is a value system in which meanness rules, parents check out, conformity is everything and stressed-out adult values are presumed to be meaningful to teenagers. . . In the world of the “A-List” or “Clique” girl, inverting [Jane] Austen (and [Louisa May] Alcott), the rich are right and good simply by virtue of their wealth. Seventh graders have Palm Pilots, red Coach clutches, Visas and cellphones in Prada messenger bags. Success and failure are entirely signaled by material possessions – specifically, by brands.<sup>1</sup>

I should admit that I rarely go anywhere without my palm pilot, visa, and cellphone, though never with a Prada messenger bag. My point today is not to go on a rampage against these books, nor to advocate a campaign of book burnings or censorship, nor to disparage the entire advertising community that encourages us to prize specific brands and buy material possessions. But today, I do want to talk about values - about what matters.

Confirmation is a time to talk about basics. Two weeks ago, we began to look at who is God; last week, why church; and in this third sermon in this series on “Confirmation – Not Just for Kids” I want to reflect upon what it is that we live for, and how we measure the good life.

I told our other confirmation class – the one with nine youth who will meet with me after church – I told them that an important aspect of confirmation is to assert that we are ready and willing to be responsible about our faith. To be responsible is to be “able to respond.” Response-able. And confirmation –whether in a class for youth or a sermon series - confirmation should help us to reflect on what it means to live responsibly in the various settings we find ourselves in: what it means to live responsibly in our families, to live responsibly in the socio-economic and political world, to live responsibly in church. To live responsibly is to act on our beliefs and make our own decisions and trust that our actions, beliefs, and decisions make a difference. We are to be responsible about our faith.<sup>2</sup>

Now faith is not the same as certainty, nor is faith the opposite of doubt. Far from it, as I will talk more about next week. As a 10<sup>th</sup> grader said last week in our confirmation class on how to read the Bible, there is a lot of stuff in there that may not be accurate. And faith is not the same as logic, or certainty, or accuracy. There is a foolishness of faith in the eyes of our culture.

Into our culture where books for teenagers feature tacky sex scenes and where meanness rules, parents check out, and conformity is everything, our faith provides a different set of guiding values. Into our culture where might makes right and the one who dies with the most toys wins, and winning at all costs is what matters, the values of faith can seem quite foolish.

It would never make it as an advertising campaign in our culture, but listen to how Jesus began his famous Sermon on the Mount, this version from the gospel of Luke.<sup>3</sup>

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.  
 Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.  
 Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.  
 Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you . . .  
 But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.  
 Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.  
 Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

And if that is not enough, Jesus continues to those who are still listening.

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also . . . Do to others as you would have them do to you.<sup>4</sup>

Now theologians have long argued whether this is Sermon on the Mount was intended by Jesus to be a realistic code of ethics. And Christians ever since have lifted these beatitudes up as an ideal even as we try to justify away our inability to live up to the "golden rule."

How utterly foolish: Love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you? Bless those who curse you? If anyone strikes you, turn the other cheek? How utterly foolish, whether as a survival guide for the mean clique-filled halls of junior high or the highest political circles where we all nod and give assent to a doctrine of preemptive military strikes. The Jesus values: love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.

In a world that says everything is a zero-sum game and the law of scarcity is the rule, faith says we trust an abundant God and that we can respond with generosity. Rather than clutching everything we can get and holding it tight, we hear Jesus' message that "those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for his sake . . . will save it."<sup>5</sup> Make no mistake about it, there is a foolishness to this faith, and do not think that it will be easy to follow this Jesus out into our daily lives!

William Willimon, former Dean of the Chapel at Duke, once got a call from a very upset parent. "I hold you personally responsible for this," the caller began. "Me?" Will asked. It turns out this father was extremely upset because his graduate school bound daughter had just informed him that she was going to "throw it all away" and go do mission work with the Presbyterians in Haiti. "Isn't that absurd!" shouted the father. "A BS degree in mechanical

engineering from Duke and she's going to dig ditches in Haiti.”

Not quite sure how to respond, the chaplain tried humor. “Well, I doubt that she's received much training in the Engineering Department here for that kind of work, but she's a fast learner and will probably get the hang of ditch-digging in a few months.”

“Look,” said the father, “this is no laughing matter. You are completely irresponsible to have encouraged her to do this. I hold you personally responsible.”

As the conversation went on, Dr. Willimon pointed out that the well-meaning but obviously unprepared parents were the ones who had started this ball rolling. They were the ones who had her baptized, read Bible stories to her, took her to Sunday School, let her go with the Presbyterian Youth Fellowship on trips. Willimon said, “You're the one who introduced her to Jesus, not me.”

“But all we ever wanted her to be was a Presbyterian,” said the father.<sup>6</sup>

When the German Evangelical Lutheran Church capitulated to Adolf Hitler and the rise of the Nazi movement that claimed to be a Christian government, the soon-to-be martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasized that discipleship was costly. To follow a foolish faith requires taking stands against unquestioned popular people. To live out a foolish faith might mean defending a new kid in school against a popular bully. To live out a foolish faith might mean protesting for peace while war looks easy and has high polling approval ratings. To live out a foolish faith might mean giving up a grad-school admission to go dig ditches in Haiti.

There is a foolishness to faith as we say key affirmations: that we are all created in God's image, that God has a particular concern for those most vulnerable – the poor, widows and orphans, immigrants in a strange land. There is a foolishness to faith. And the apostle Paul knew that, as we hear our passage for this morning.

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. . . For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

“For the message about the cross is foolishness,” Paul writes. This is hard for us to hear. We have grown so used to the cross. Our sanctuary has two of them – beautiful crosses, in fact. A golden cross that can be carried in on processional Sundays. A simple wooden cross on the wall draped with the liturgical color of purple for royalty and passion. We have grown so used to the cross. Many of us wear jewelry with crosses. But the cross was not always embraced by followers of Jesus. The cross, after all, was the preferred instrument of capital punishment of the Roman Empire. As some have said, it would be like wearing a gold electric chair around your neck.

In fact, despite Paul's embrace of the cross, and his contrast of God's foolishness with human wisdom, early Christians did not quite know what to do with the cross. How were they to deal with Jesus' death? Was his death a sign of weakness – of a revolutionary movement that in the end did not have quite enough support to succeed? It should not be too surprising that there were very few images of the cross in early Christian art.

The interesting thing about Jesus, however, is that when he had the opportunity to force the whole world to accept a certain set of values he did not. When Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time and the people were hailing him as king, he could have started a civil war in that tinderbox of a region. Backed by divine power, he just might have won. But he refused to impose his values upon us and instead, gave himself over to our vision of the world— which led to his crucifixion, his death. He didn't win—or at least not in the way we expect. He was dead. “How foolish he was,” his detractors must have said. God raises Christ from the dead not to snap magic fingers and make the world perfect but to show us that it is precisely this foolish sort of faith that leads to true life. Isn't that what we mean when we say that for us, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life?<sup>7</sup>

William Willimon, that same irresponsible college chaplain explained his theory of how churches are designed.

I think the reason why we pad our pews, and bolt the furniture down to the floor, print up the service in a bulletin, and carefully, deliberately plod through the prescribed acts of worship is an inner fear. We tie everything down, we make church so predictable, so settled and fixed because, in our collective memories, we remember [these] stories...of ordinary people who have heard their names called. We know that the temple, or this church can be a risky, dangerous place, what with the living God roaming about.<sup>8</sup>

With this foolish faith of ours, we just never know for sure what will happen next!

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<sup>1</sup> Naomi Wolf, “Wild Things,” in The New York Times Book Review, 12 March, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> From the “Journeys of Faith” confirmation published by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

<sup>3</sup> In Luke 6:17-49, this sermon is usually called “The Sermon on the Plain” but the same collection of teachings is more commonly known by Matthew's “Sermon on the Mount” (5:1-7:27).

<sup>4</sup> Luke 6:26-31

<sup>5</sup> Mark 8:35

<sup>6</sup> William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, 10 September, 1995. I have heard versions of this story several times, and found it in this form in a sermon preached by Rev. Dr. David Leininger at the First Presbyterian Church in Warren, Pennsylvania, [www.presbyterianwarren.com/the\\_voice.html](http://www.presbyterianwarren.com/the_voice.html).

<sup>7</sup> This paragraph is based heavily on some thoughts expressed by the Rev. Zach Wilson, pastor of Spirit of Life Presbyterian Church in Apple Valley, Minnesota, [www.spiritoflifeav.org/archives/3](http://www.spiritoflifeav.org/archives/3)

<sup>8</sup> William Willimon, sermon “The Dangers of Going to Church” Jan. 19, 1997 also cited by Leininger's sermon listed above.