

APRIL FOOL

Luke 20:9-19

Foolish. I got fooled this week. It was April Fool's Day and one of you, I won't mention any names, one of you sent me an email with an April Fool's joke that I fell for. It said, in light of the American Family Insurance buyout for the moniker on Miller Park, that there was also an agreement that the Brewers would get a new name: the Milwaukee Insurers. I was shocked – and shared it with five or six other people as Gospel Truth. Then I come to find out that it was an April Fool's email. Did you ever feel like a fool?

Foolish. Imagine how the office workers felt in this scenario? Vicki's was a temp at various offices. At one place she became the resident expert on the photocopier machine. One day there was a big backup. She went over to help and found that no one knew how to stop the copier from "punching" three holes down the side of each copy. She quickly opened the paper tray, removed the three-hole paper and solved the problem.

Foolish. You'd have to feel just a little bit foolish after something like that. Let me share one more story with you and see what you think about this outrageous scene: A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, "What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him."

Can you imagine such a scenario? The old saying goes, "fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." You can't keep pulling the same April Fool's gag year after year and not think people won't figure it out. But then again, that's exactly what seems to happen to the vineyard owner in our text. He sends in his servant the first time, and they beat him up. A second time -- they beat him up. A third time, they beat him up. The vineyard owner has now been fooled three full times by these thankless tenants. His trust has been abused. His kindness victimized. Continually. Perpetually.

So what do you think his natural response would be? What would you do? Of course, the answer is obvious. "Ah, yes, this time, of course, let's send in my only son."
NOT!

Do you see what I mean when I talk about foolishness!? Who would do such a thing? -- make yourself vulnerable time and time again -- open yourself up to be abused and misused after continual stomping? It's outrageous -- it's unbelievable. And yet our Lord Jesus is using this story, in our text, to illustrate the commitment of our heavenly Father to the salvation of His people.

Who are the servants? They are the prophets of old. Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, Obadiah. Sent by God to proclaim His message. Sent by God to declare His justice, His comfort, and the hope He offers. And what was the response to these envoys of God? The author of Hebrews writes: "Some were tortured, some faced jeers and flogging, while others were stoned. They were sawed in two, they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them."

The people of God just kept turning away. It is the recurring story of the Old Testament, from the days of Adam unto the days of Nehemiah --the people's faithlessness.

But it is also the recurring message of the Old Testament, (and the New), that God just keeps coming back -- again, and again, and again. He makes pledges and promises and holds Himself to them even when the people turn away. He offers grace and kindness, even when the people return it with cruelty and coldhearted, stiff-necked stubbornness. He goes way beyond what anyone would consider reasonable commitment, to what most would consider "radical (yea, foolish) dedication."

And that foolish dedication is now being fulfilled, says Jesus, in God's final, greatest act of love. Into the world He sends His very own Son. His heir, His beloved, His faithful, righteous, perfect, obedient One. The Son is sent to bear the message to truth. He is sent to pronounce God's radical commitment. He is sent, in human flesh, to be the Incarnation of God Himself so that the abusive, coldhearted, stiff-necked people might have hope.

Do they deserve it? No. Have they earned it? No. Will they receive it with grateful hearts and open arms? No. Jesus says it plainly. "This is the heir," they said, "Let's kill him and the inheritance will be ours." So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him."

I am reminded of one of my favorite movies: Rocky. (Okay, you do have to be from Philadelphia to have a special affinity for these flicks.) I don't know if you remember the movie. But one of the things that strikes everybody about Rocky Balboa, the boxer, is that after round and round and round of pummeling and pounding to his injured body, he just keeps coming back. Each round, he gets up, gives a forward motion with his boxing gloves, and beckons the surprised fighter to come at him, with everything he's got.

Well, that's exactly what God's sinful people did, what the world did, and what Satan did. They came at this Son with everything they had: torture, beating, scorn, persecution, and finally crucifixion. And that not to mention their persistent unfaithfulness, unkindness, selfishness, greed, and pride. The deck was stacked against this Son. The enemies were determined to have their way.

But the Son is even more determined. His face is resolutely set to walk into the ring and be pummeled to death so that, in the end, His people might have rescue. He refused to give up. And, in the end, when everyone had written off the Son of God as entirely cut off -- when everyone was sure that His lifeless corpse meant His words and promises were just empty jibberish. He still couldn't be kept down. Instead, He burst forth from that stone-cold tomb to proclaim His ultimate victory over every evil force. To declare that He is the Son of God, that His words and promises are true, and that we, too, can have everlasting life.

Jesus says it Himself: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone." That is, nothing could keep Jesus from building His Church. The devil, the world, the Pharisees, the Scribes, all rational argumentation and all logical human reaction -- even death itself. NO. Nothing. Instead, He is the cornerstone -- the foundation -- the place where we anchor all our hopes and all our dreams, our past, our present, and all our tomorrows. In Christ, that which was dead, has now become alive -- that which was lost is now found.

Jesus speaks this parable on Tuesday of Holy Week -- as He is about to go to the cross -- as a message to you and me of His radical devotion to our care. I wonder. As disciples of His in a fallen world -- as followers of Him who the world would describe as a "Fool" -- are we ready to open up our hands to radical devotion so that others too may know the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding. Are we ready to become April "fools" for Christ?

What's an April Fool? An April fool is somebody who is so motivated by the events that we traditionally associate with April -- Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday -- so grateful for God's tremendous sacrifice of love and so moved by His Holy Spirit, that he, too, begins to open up hands in radical -- call them "foolish" ways. What am I talking about?

How about foolish forgiveness? When the world says hold onto your anger, get 'em back, make 'em pay, -- God declares, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Foolishness to the world - but the wisdom of God.

And how about foolish compassion? When the world declares that we ought to watch out for good old number one -- that we ought to care simply about our own business and our own well-being, Jesus declares, "A new command I give to you. Love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Foolishness to the world, but the wisdom of God.

And how about foolish giving? When the world declares that we ought to keep what we have for our own please and enjoyment -- that we ought hoard our possessions and hold onto our treasures so that we can live the good life, our Lord declares: "Give and it will be given unto you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap." Foolishness to the world, but the wisdom of God.

And is it foolish peace when a Christian faces death square in the face and can sing "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow" as Ruth Schiefelbein did with her family the other day as she faced her final hours. And is it foolish joy when a Christian faces a difficult circumstance and can say, "Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again, rejoice?" And is it foolish hope when a Christian looks at hardships and trials, tragedy or pain and declares, "My God will supply all my needs according to His riches in Christ Jesus?" Yes, it is -- utter foolishness. Incredible foolishness. But the wisdom and power of God.

Foolishness. Will you ever really be a fool when you try to imitate Christ. While His ways may be foolish to the world, and may even, often, seem unfathomable to us, in the end we know that His ways are taking us somewhere.

And so we come today, in the face of Jesus parable, and declare, "Lord, we want to be like you. We want to be "April Fools." We know that we cannot do so by our own human ideals or by our own force of will -- but moved by Your Spirit and transformed by Your Word, we lay down our selfishness, our greed, our pride and anger and ask you to make us imitators of your Son Jesus. For in Him we have found life -- in Him we have found hope -- and on the cornerstone of His sacrifice we rest our souls."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.