

Sermon – John 2:13-22; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25  
David R. Lyle  
Grace Lutheran Church  
3 Lent – Year B  
4 March 2018

“Out with the Old, In with the Foolish”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Some days, it feels like parenting young children involves little more than the creation and enforcement of rules, most of which we seem to make up as we go along. There are old standbys, like never riding your bike without a helmet and looking both ways before you cross the street. In our house, we’ve added things such as no television on school days and no coming out of your bedroom until the number on the clock starts with a six – although that’s a rule without much teeth. And some are arbitrary and made up as the need arises. So it is that in our house it’s against the rules to have light-saber fights in the kitchen or to practice air guitar to Led Zeppelin until you’ve finished your dinner; these rules, sadly, apply to me, too. Our children, of course, chafe against most of these rules, but Erika and I have not put them in place to be mean or demanding. Well, not usually, anyway. The rules exist for the well-being and protection of our kids, in the hope that they will grow up with a sense of what it means to care for oneself and one another in the community that is our family.
2. Our readings today take us first to Mount Sinai, to the giving of the law to Moses and the people. In God’s parental love, it is the well-being of the people that is front and center. The commandments are not given as a set of onerous demands but as a vision of what it means to live in the beloved family of God’s children. Keep God at the center of your lives, the commandments tell us, and treat others well. Which all seems simple enough, but we know the

story. The people will stray into and out of idolatry, putting anyone but God at the center. And the people will continually fail to treat one another well. Why? Because of sin, of course, our age-old rebellion against the wishes of our Creator. Once God ceases to be at the center, the whole thing falls apart. Justice is lost. Oppression of the poor emerges. And so it is today. The law didn't create sin, but it sure does point out the sin in the people – of ancient Israel and of all people everywhere. God attempts to instill wisdom, but we respond with foolishness, which is most simply defined as a lack of good judgment that, in this case, leads to the fraying of the human family and the relegation of God to the edges of our lives.

3. This is the situation into which Jesus walks when he enters the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was built, and then rebuilt, to keep God at the center. It was the place where God's glory dwelt most clearly, a unifying force for the people. And it was the place for sacrifice, for the people to atone for their sins. The temple and the sacrificial system were holy, instituted by God. But the people, being people, had fallen into systemic abuse of the whole affair. The moneychangers and the sellers of sacrificial animals were making money hand over fist. What had been meant to bring people closer to God was instead tearing at the community, and the poor suffered the most. But Jesus' righteous fury, his whip-slinging, table-turning anger, is not due simply to the abuse of the system, but is directed at the system itself, from top to bottom. Jesus has come to re-center humanity. He shows that the Temple was a stopgap measure, a way for the people to remain connected to God until a new thing would unfold. And what unfolds is nothing short of foolishness, a story that we, in our wisdom, would say smacks of poor judgment on God's part.
4. The old ways make sense to us, after all, although it would take some getting used to the bloodiness of it all. Apart from that, the old ways of laws, of striving to achieve, of punishment and atonement, make sense to us. But

Jesus? Who is Jesus if not the foolishness of God on full display. One could say that our reading today is the capstone to the beginning of John's Gospel in which the full, foolish plan of forgiveness and salvation is on display. The Temple was the place for sacrifice, but now comes Jesus, whom John the Baptist declared to be the Lamb of God, the One who takes away the sin of the world once and for all through his self-sacrifice. The Temple was the seat of God's glory, a majestic edifice fit for a king, but here is Jesus, declaring that the new throne of glory will be the rough hewn wood on which he will be crucified. The Temple was the unifying center for the people, but now the body of the crucified and risen Christ is our center – a center that reaches far beyond Jerusalem, available to any and all to the ends of the earth. Jesus, after all, before emptying the Temple first goes to a wedding at Cana in Galilee, nowhere near the power center, and changes water into finest wine to show that God's abundant goodness will soon be found everywhere. The coming Kingdom looks much less like the serious work of the Temple and much more like the foolish fun of a wedding reception.

5. It is worth remembering from time to time that, underneath it all, this is a foolish story. That God would become human, would suffer, would die for us, and that in so doing we could shake off the demands of the law as we experience the fresh wind of freedom that rushes forth from the cross and the empty tomb. That we could re-embrace God's law as it was intended – not as the means to earn God's favor but as a way to freely live out our love for God and neighbor in the beloved community. To remember that God has always loved us, and will do whatever it takes to get back to the center of our lives. Jesus proclaims that his cross is where we will find him, never mind our baffled wonderment that God would allow such divine abasement and humiliation. If that's what it takes to shake us out of our dead stupor, our idolatry and injustice, then that's what God will do, and that's what God has done. For you and for me, once and for all.

6. In these days, Erika's grandmother continues her journey toward death and resurrection. I traveled to Wisconsin this weekend for a fundraiser for my home congregation, and took the opportunity to visit Kay in hospice care. Her room is a thing to behold, with pictures of her family covering the walls. But in the center of the wall across from her bed, there's one spot without a picture. Something else hangs there instead: a simple wooden cross in the middle of everything. I commented on this, and she looked at me with a tired, joyful smile and said, "Well, of course. Jesus is in the middle of it all." And that's just it, isn't it? In Jesus' death and resurrection, God has ended up right where God wants to be – in the center of our lives, to the margins of the world, so that we can know God's loving grace.
  
7. In the new Temple of Jesus' risen body, there is room for the whole family of God. Yes, there are still rules to keep, but they are the laws of Christian freedom, guideposts to mark what it means to be children of God. There is freedom, which is exactly that. Freedom even to be foolish – not in the sense of lacking good judgment, but to be foolish in the face of the world's so-called wisdom. During Lent, we are called to repentance for our sins, but it is not meant to be a joyless affair. It is, rather, the reminder that in spite of our sin, Easter is coming. God in the risen Christ has not come to be a new lawgiver or taskmaster but a joyous Lord who delights in being at the center of our lives. After all, as a parent, my joy does not come from rules declared and enforced. It happens when I set aside the things that I, in my wisdom, think are so important and get down on the floor to play cars and trucks or a board game with my kids. The rules of our house exist to keep the children safe, but the joy is in the foolishness we find in our loving, laughing play. The German theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes, "it is possible that in playing we can anticipate our liberation and with laughing rid ourselves of the bonds which alienate us from real life." Maybe that's what God wanted all along: not burdensome rules and drudging obedience, but to get down on the floor with us to enjoy the beloved community that now exists through the divine

foolishness of grace. In the midst of our Lenten seriousness, we do well to not lose sight of God's foolishness, the divine desire to forgive us, to love us, to live with us, to enjoy us. And even to embrace a spirit of foolishness that comes from the very heart of God shown forth in our crucified and risen Lord. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.