

November 6, 2016
1 Corinthians 4:9-13
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“Foolish”

Good morning. I don't know about you, but I don't like to be foolish. I try not to act foolish, and I don't like to look foolish, either. Believe me, there's a lot of potential for both when you stand up and preach in front of a group of people. I try to prepare what I'm going to say and actually practice saying it out loud so that I don't make some embarrassing mistake -- the word “Gentile” can be tricky. I also think about how I'm going to present myself, so I look professional, but also so I don't have earrings that rattle on this headset, or I don't wear a dress without a waistband and end up with a cordless microphone sticking up from my back collar. Some of you who have led worship have found this out the hard way, I know.

I'm not looking for sympathy -- this is part of my job, and the bottom line is that I want people to hear what I say, and that's more difficult if there are a lot of distractions. I want people to take me seriously, to respect who I am and what I stand for. But it is possible to take ourselves too seriously. There is something inherently foolish about folks who are pompous and self-important, something that just makes us itch to burst their bubble. That's why the Saturday Night Live satire of political candidates is so popular; it's why the medieval courts of Europe had court jesters: they were fools who made fun of those in power -- often simply by telling the truth. It provided some entertainment in a society that didn't have anything resembling a free press, but it could be a dangerous game -- not every ruler has a sense of humor.

The letter we know as 1 Corinthians was at least the second letter which the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. This was a cosmopolitan and primarily Gentile congregation, and they were a

fractious group. There were cases of flagrant sexual immorality, poor members of the congregation were marginalized, and some members were questioning Paul's authority as an apostle. These disputes were fueled by folks who claimed to have special religious knowledge or wisdom, or spiritual gifts that gave them special status in the church and in the kingdom of God. Paul is writing directly to these pompous and self-righteous folks. I bet most of you have heard, and some of you can probably quote the opening verse of 1 Corinthians chapter 13. It is often read at weddings, but it was originally written for, and is equally applicable to, church fights. "If I speak with tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Noisy gongs and clanging cymbals are just distractions -- they are not the message.

Paul is being more than a little sarcastic in chapter 4 when he writes to the self-righteous folks at Corinth: You have everything you want! You're like kings! I wish I could be a king like you are, rich and powerful and wise. But I'm just a fool. Weak and disreputable, beaten and homeless with nothing to give but blessing and endurance in Christ. Paul is telling the Corinthians that weakness in Christ is far more powerful than all the pretentiousness and posturing of those who want to advertise their superior spiritual gifts. I don't know if the folks at Corinth got the message -- Paul wrote them yet another letter -- but it's a message that I believe we need to take a long, hard look at. Are we trying to promote how rich and powerful and wise we are, hoping that people will come and be impressed? Or are we doing the foolish and costly work of building relationships and committing to discipleship?

Some of you shared your personal slogans, mottos, bumper stickers with me after I invited you to do that last week. To those of you who took the time to consider this and share it, thank you. I have read and prayed over them all, even though I won't share them all this morning. The invitation is still open if you did not do this in your small group, or if you need more time. This is only partly for me -- it's also for you to think about and articulate what's important to you, and what you would share with someone else.

Let me read some of them. I'll warn you that some of them are pretty foolish: not the kinds of slogans which will get you elected to political

office, or gain you a lot of influence. I hope you'll understand that my commentary is tongue-in-cheek:

TREAT OTHERS AS YOU WOULD LIKE TO BE TREATED
Sounds reasonable enough; at least until someone treats you badly, then you have to counter-punch 'em hard.

SERVICE BEFORE SELF Don't most people do it the other way around?

WILLING TO GIVE WHAT YOU'VE GOT That sounds like socialism

COME EAT WITH ME You're inviting strangers to share a meal with you?

BE APPROACHABLE Isn't that kind of risky?

FORGIVENESS IS FOR EVERYONE Everyone? C'mon

CHOOSE LOVE Oh for cryin' out loud. People are going to walk all over you

DON'T TAILGATE ME: FOLLOW JESUS

OK, I wrote the last one, and it's a little silly, but some of those others are just plain foolish. And let me tell you, I know who wrote some of these things and you *actually live* this way: you are generous, loving, approachable and forgiving. God bless you for that foolishness -- I don't know where Creekside would be without you.

It got me to thinking about Creekside's mission and vision statements. Yes, Virginia, Creekside has a mission and a vision statement. I think they're terrific, and anyone who's ever been in my office can see how the tree imagery of our vision statement resonates with me. It is: Rooted in God, Growing Jesus, Bearing Fruit in the Spirit, resonates with me. Who can tell me the three verbs of Creekside's mission statement -- without looking at the big framed piece in the Gathering Area? Seek, Celebrate, Share. As I said, I think

these are fine statements -- memorable, familiar, biblical. But are they foolish enough?

One of the suggestions in the written report from E3 Ministry Group, and something CEO John Neff shared in his Skype conversation with us was that we should revisit these mission and vision statements and see if they are still adequate to reflect who we are and who we hope to become. I want to share some quotes from the book *Outrageous and Courageous* which many of us have been studying over the past 8 weeks or so. From chapter 8: "Not everyone is called to be a chaplain for Hell's Angels . . . and it's true that Christian faithfulness includes plain 'ol, boring 'ol reliability. Just showing up and staying true is an accomplishment . . . But no one is called to gutless neutrality. No one is called to self-preservation by practicing the lowest common denominator of vaguely Christian niceness." (p 136)

Brothers and sisters, make no mistake, being foolish is risky. Some of these slogans that you came up with -- if you actually live like that, you could get hurt; people could take advantage of you. **FORGIVENESS IS FOR EVERYONE:** if you live like that, you will look foolish. You will not get to enjoy the resentment that you're entitled to when people treat you badly. And people are out to get you, aren't they? It's hard enough to trust the people we know; it's ridiculous to be inviting and approachable with strangers. Of course, if we *don't* forgive anyone, what do we have then? The satisfaction of knowing we're right, ourselves for company, bitterness? What are we being called to as the church of Jesus Christ, who had the audacity to say that "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it"? (Matthew 16:25) We will be fools if we try to follow these words of Christ, but we're cowards if we don't. Which is it gonna be?

I'm going to ask you a question next week, but I'm going to tell you a week ahead of time so that you can be thinking of how you would respond. Ultimately this is a question of us to answer together in the coming months. I shared this question with the small group leaders a couple weeks ago, so you may have already heard it. If you're not part of a small group, your thoughts are still important, and I encourage you to share them with me or with Pastor Elizabeth. It's a

simple question, but I'm guessing it will take some time to answer. Here's the question: What is ours to do right now? This is closely related to another question: what am I called to do? Telling other people what you think they ought to do is not the answer. Be willing to commit to what you think is vital and important and God's call is what will shape our mission and vision and how we go forward together at Creekside.

Are we willing to actually Seek, Celebrate, and Share; can we commit to being Rooted in God, Growing in Jesus and Bearing Fruit in the Spirit, or is there another direction where you think God is calling us. I'll be eager to hear what you have to say, and I hope your answers are a little foolish. Amen.