

The Rev. Dr. Eric O. Springsted  
Georgetown Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC  
July 12, 2009

### **On Foolishness**

**Text:** St. Mark 6:14-29

According to the old song, fools rush in where angels fear to tread. And, alas, they generally do rush in, thus forcing the singer to introduce himself, as one version of the song has it, by saying “meet a brand new fool.” Now, the contrast between angels and fools is clear. Even though both may love, angels fear to tread in some places because they know well enough what is ahead; being wise, they don’t go there. Fools, on the other hand, even if they happen to know what is ahead, rush in anyhow. That in a nutshell is pretty much the definition of a fool, namely, somebody who ought to know better, but who goes ahead and does the stupid thing anyhow.

This distinguishes fools from the merely ignorant or the not-smart-enough. Doing something when we are ignorant of the principles or the consequences involved, and could not possibly know them, makes us ignorant but it doesn’t make us fools. Doing something because we weren’t smart enough to foresee what would come of it may make us less than omniscient, but it doesn’t make us guilty. Foolishness does, however. For foolishness is a sort of willful ignorance, an ignorance where we deliberately fail to gain knowledge we should have or where we suppress knowledge that we already have.

Fools can come to us in all sorts of ways. Sometimes they are lovers, and sometimes bold foolishness in somebody who is in love can be even a bit attractive and admirable. Often, however, foolishness can result in a type of evil that makes any number of people suffer.

Consider Herod. From what we know of him and his lineage, clearly, he is powerful, vindictive, ruthless, and even somewhat fearless; he doesn’t seem to fear the opinions of many

other people. He descended from a grandfather who was so bold as to slaughter all the male children in the area of Jerusalem when he learned of the birth of the Messiah from the three wise men from the east. Our Herod was willing to marry his brother's wife and his own cousin in violation of religious law and he was willing to jail John the Baptist, and ultimately to execute him for criticizing him for doing these things. He and his soldiers were the ones who were responsible sometime later for the cruel mocking of Jesus on the night before the crucifixion. He was not a nice person.

But there is another side to Herod, a side where he shows himself to be a person of some intellectual curiosity. At Jesus' trial, when Jesus was sent to him by Pilate, Luke tells us that Herod was actually happy for the opportunity to meet Jesus, because, we are told, he wanted to see him perform some miracle or wonder. It was only after he didn't get the miracle that the mocking began. With respect to John the Baptist, we are told by Mark, that after imprisoning him, Herod used to go down to the dungeon to talk to him. Although what John had to say perplexed him, still he liked listening to him. We can well imagine the conversations they might have had: John not backing off a bit, and being fierce about it; Herod, listening, his conscience suggesting that there was something right in John's message, and his own desires pulling in quite the opposite direction. But the conversation, of course, ended soon enough after Herod served up John's head on a platter to his exotic, erotic dancing niece, Salome.

But despite his intellectual curiosity, and the hint thereby that he might be reformable, Herod is a fool. That is proved easily enough by his boastful vow to Salome. As a reward for her striptease, he promised her that he would give her anything she wanted. It is a vow that only a fool would make, for wiser heads would surely recognize that there are some things that may well be in our power, but that, nevertheless, we ought never to do – such as serving up the heads

of prophets on platters. It is also a vow that only a fool would keep, for only a fool would put his pride and public image on the line in a drunken boast, and only a fool would believe that he had no way out of such a vow, no way to save face except by murder.

Such a vow is a hideous example of foolishness. But it isn't just the vow that makes Herod a fool, it is something else. For the fact of the matter is that Herod should have known better. Herod, in fact, *did* know better, for he had enough curiosity to listen to John and John had told him in rather exact terms what was better. His curiosity was the one thing that was to his advantage; it was the one thing that could save him and reform him. But even though John told him time and time again what was good for him, still, Herod, when his own pride and lusts were on the line, failed to take John's advice to heart. He should have known better, but still chose to go in the opposite direction. That was what made him a fool.

Herod may be a murderer and a tyrant, and in that he is different than most people, and even most fools. But there is a point where he isn't so very different in his religious life than other people. Like others, he listens but never takes to heart what he hears. The message stays out there, floating, somewhere. It is an abstraction, and he remains uncommitted. He never takes it into his heart, he never approaches the message of goodness with any good act, including humility, or even much of a desire to maintain a clean conscience, at least not if it is going to cost him anything. That he never really took it in is obvious, of course, from the foolish vow he made and his willingness to behead the Baptist.

It is often said that we live in an irreligious age, or in a secular age. It is not quite clear what that means. Ours is an age in which there is a great deal of religion being talked about, and more kinds of religion than ever before. It is an age in which there is a great of curiosity about religion. Books about Islam fairly fly off the shelves of booksellers. There has been an increased

interest in spirituality in the last few years. One columnist noted that in order to get a book published these days all you had to do was put the words “soul” or “spirit” somewhere in the title. Students in colleges are interested in religion and often when they have an elective they choose to fill it with a course in religion. So, we are curious about religion. We want to know about it. We suspect that there is something there, something that we ought to pay attention to, for our own good if not the good of the world.

But where our age is irreligious is where it leaves all this curiosity lying at the level of mere curiosity, or perhaps superstition, something like a good luck charm to ward off the demons of the apocalyptic age in which we live. It never takes root. Where our age, or any age for that matter, is irreligious is when we are mere hearers of the word, but don't really betake ourselves to think it, and to make it ours. At the same time that we are more curious about it, we are becoming more and more ignorant about religion, any religion. Although America has really a rather high percentage of people who go to worship of one sort or another, because of that ignorance, that could change very quickly. The phenomenon may be hollow.

There are two ways of thinking: one is to think *about* something. That is to muse and opine about it, and perhaps to explore it a little. To think *about* something, however, usually means that we stand at a distance from the object contemplated, remaining uncommitted, and approaching it without any great cost to ourselves. To think something, to really think something, on the other hand, is to think it as belonging to our own being.

St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians exhorts the Philippians this way: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, what is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Paul is not asking his readers simply to muse about these things; he is

asking them to think about these things as what comes out of their commitment to their Lord. To think these things seriously is to make them one's own. More strongly, to think about them as one's own is to become these things; indeed, it is the only way to become good, just, and worthy.

But what does it mean to think, to really think these things, to think as one who is wise and not a fool? It means that in thinking them *we* think them as our own; it means obeying them, not because they impose a duty on us from the outside, but because they are a matter of our own consciences and minds. It means thinking them in such a way that to go against them would be to lose something of ourselves. It means to think God in such a way that God is never an abstraction, but the very soul of our souls; it means to think God in such a way that we never use God but open ourselves up to be used by God. For God is no abstraction, and to think God we must be, as the letter of James says, not only hearers of the Word, but doers as well.

But too often we are just hearers. Too often, whereas the love and knowledge of God ought to be what churches are about, we run them quite differently. Too often, the joke Kierkegaard told about the Danish National Church belongs to other churches as well: A man walked into a shop to get his pants pressed, because he saw a sign in the window that said "Pants pressed here."

"Oh, sir," the clerk explained, "we don't press pants here. It's the sign that's for sale."

There is an allegory that illustrates the point even more obviously, and illustrates the difference between the wise and the foolish. It is called the City of Everywhere. It is the tale of a man who might have been I, for I dreamt one time of journeying to that metropolis, The City of Everywhere.

I arrived early one morning. It was cold, there were flurries of snow on the ground and as I stepped from the train to the platform I noticed that the baggageman was attired in a heavy coat

and gloves, but, oddly enough, wore no shoes.

My initial impulse was to ask the reason for this strange practice, but holding my tongue I went into the station and inquired the way to the hotel. My curiosity, however, was immediately enhanced by the discovery that no one in the station wore shoes.

Upon arriving at the hotel I found the bellhop, the clerk and the guests of the place were all without shoes.

Unable to restrain myself any longer, I asked the manager what the practice meant.

“What practice?” he replied.

“Why,” said I, pointing to his bare feet, “Why don’t you wear shoes in this town?”

“Ah,” he said, “that is just it. Why don’t we?”

“But what is the matter? Don’t you believe in shoes?”

“Believe in shoes, my friend! I should say we do. That is the first article of our creed, shoes. They are indispensable to the well-being of humanity. Such cuts, sores, suffering, as shoes prevent. It is wonderful.”

“Then why don’t you wear them?”

“Ah,” he said, “that is just it. Why don’t we?”

Though considerably perplexed, I checked in, secured my room and went directly to the coffee shop and deliberately sat down by an amiable looking gentleman who likewise conformed to this practice of his fellow citizens. He wore no shoes. Friendly enough, he suggested that after we had eaten that we look about the city.

The first thing we noticed upon emerging from the hotel was a huge brick structure. To this he pointed with pride.

“You see that?...That is one of our outstanding shoe manufacturing establishments.”

“A what?” I asked. “You mean you make shoes there?”

“Well, not exactly,” said he. “We talk about making shoes there and believe me, we have got one of the most brilliant men you have ever heard. He talks most thrillingly and convincingly every week on this great subject of shoes. Why, just yesterday he moved the people profoundly with his exposition of the necessity of shoe-wearing. Many broke down and wept. It was really wonderful.”

“But why don’t they wear them?” I insisted.

“Ah,” he said, putting his hand upon my arm, and looking wistfully into my eyes, “that is just it. Why don’t we?”

Just then as we turned down a side street, I saw through a cellar window a cobbler actually making a pair of shoes. Excusing myself from my friend I burst into the little shop and asked the shoemaker how it happened that his shop was not overrun with customers. He said, “Nobody wants my shoes. They just talk about them.”

“Give me what pairs you have,” I said, and paid him three times the amount he asked. Hurriedly, I returned to my friend and offered them to him. “Here, one of these pairs will surely fit you. Take them, put them on. They will save you untold suffering.”

But he looked embarrassed; in fact, he was overcome.

“Ah, thank you. But you don’t understand. It just isn’t being done. The front families – well, I...”

“But why don’t you wear them?”

“Ah,” he said, smiling with his accustomed ingratiating touch of practical wisdom, “that is just it. Why don’t we?”

And coming out of the City of Everywhere into the Here and Now, over and over and

over that question rang in my ears: “ Why don’t we? Why don’t we? Why don’t we?”

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and do not the things I command you?”