

## NO FOOLING GOD

### Scripture Readings: Acts 4:32 – 5:11; Luke 12:15-25

If your SON becomes a PRIEST and then DIES, what do you call him?

- The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Lord said to John "come forth and receive the holy spirit" ...but John came in fifth and won a toaster.

A pastor is walking through the jungle when he comes upon a hungry lion. Just as the lion goes to attack, the pastor raises her hands and says, "*Lord, if you can hear me, please instill the Holy Spirit in this beast's heart.*" The lion stops in his tracks as a bright light begins to glow around him. He looks to the sky, folds his paws in prayer, and says, "*Thank you, Lord, for this meal.*"

It's all about the Holy Spirit, this book of Acts. It's all about how the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of the Living God, filled and transformed this small community of followers of the Way and molded them, melted them, filled them, used them to become something marvellous, something new in the history of humanity: The Church of Jesus Christ.

And it was all about the Spirit.

It's a curious thing to see the book of Acts and Luke's Gospel laid side by side because what you see very clearly is how everything that Jesus did, every power that Jesus exercised, was then performed and exercised by those early Christians:

- In Luke 13, a crippled woman is healed by Jesus; in Acts 3, a lame man is healed by John and Peter;
- In Luke 8, a woman with a flow of blood is healed by touching the hem of Jesus' garment; in Acts 5, a man is healed by coming into contact with Peter's shadow;
- In Luke 19, the rich tax collector Zacchaeus is inspired by Jesus to share his wealth with others; in Acts 4, the whole early Christian community shares their wealth, holding their possessions in common;
- In Luke 23, as Jesus dies, his last words are, "*Forgive them, for they know not what they do*"; in Acts 7, Stephen is killed by an angry crowd and his dying words are of forgiveness for them.

Again and again, we see the same things Jesus did being done by the early apostles and followers of the Way. The thing that makes it possible, the thing that transforms them into the image of the Christ, is the Holy Spirit. It is done "*by the power of the Holy Spirit,*" we are told. The Greek word for "power" used here is "*dynamos.*" The dynamite of the Holy Spirit powers them, ignites them, transforms them.

And in the end of our reading for this morning, we find out that this dynamite, this power is, at its root, the primal power of the universe.

- It's the same power that said, "*Let there be light*" and there WAS light.
- It's the same power Moses was talking about when he brought the covenant to the Hebrews in the wilderness: "*I have set before you this day life and death, blessing and curse: choose life so that you and your descendants might live.*"
- It's the same power John the Evangelist tells us entered into the world through the incarnation of Jesus Christ: "*In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*"

That's the power that was present with the Holy Spirit and was present in that little community of believers who were inspired to share their means to sustain the lives of one another and the life of their community.

Now, I know you were stunned by the ending of our reading, when Ananias and Sapphira, husband and wife, decide to conceal their gain, hoard their prosperity, and then are suddenly struck dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. I should have saved this passage for Stewardship Sunday!

This is not one of those easy, heart-warming passages from Scripture. I don't doubt but that the real facts were probably far less dramatic – Ananias perhaps died of a long illness and Sapphira perhaps years later. And the story was conflated in the Christian community's telling for dramatic and probably comic effect.

But there's a deep truth lying behind this passage: the power of the Holy Spirit is the power of life. And those who do not choose the Holy Spirit are dead already, dead in their souls, dead in their hearts, dead in their selves if not yet in their bodies. And there's a word for those folks who do not choose the Spirit, who do not choose life: that word is "*fool*."

I'm sorry to say that the story I'm about to tell you is absolutely true:

A Vermont native, Ronald Demuth, was touring the Eagle's Rock African Safari Zoo with a group of Russian tourists. Mr. Demuth decided to show these Russian visitors one of America's many marvels – "*crazy glue*." While at the petting zoo, Mr. Demuth put about 3 ounces of the adhesive in the palms of his hands, and jokingly placed them on the buttocks of a passing rhino named Sally.

Sally, the rhino, wasn't startled at first - she had been part of the petting exhibit since her arrival as a baby 13 years earlier. However, once Sally became aware that she was involuntarily stuck to Mr. Demuth, she began to panic and ran around the petting area wildly giving Ronald an unexpected and rather bumpy ride. During Sally's tirade two fences were destroyed, a shed wall was gored, and a number of small animals escaped.

There was another complication as well. James Douglas, the petting zoo caretaker, told the New York Times, "*Sally [the rhino] hadn't been feeling well lately. She had been very constipated. We had just given her a laxative and some depressants to relax her bowels, when Mr. Demuth played his juvenile prank.*"

It took a team of medics and zoo caretakers to remove Mr. Demuth's hands from the rhino's buttocks. However, during this process the laxatives began to take hold and Mr. Demuth was repeatedly showered with over 30 gallons of rhino diarrhea. Douglas explains: *"It was tricky. We had to calm her down, while at the same time shield our faces from being pelted... I guess you could say that Mr. Demuth was into it up to his neck. Once she was under control, we had three people with shovels working to keep an air passage open for Mr. Demuth. We were able to tranquilize her and apply a solvent to remove his hands from her rear."* Douglas added, *"I don't think he'll be playing with crazy glue for a while."*

What do you think? This man stuck between the power of crazy glue and the power of a rhino – was he a fool?

According to Scripture, about the worst thing you can call anybody is *"fool."* Jesus says, in Matthew 5:22, that anyone who calls his neighbor *"fool"* will be in danger of damnation. But just because God doesn't give us permission to call one another fools, there are certain rare occasions in which God doesn't mind calling us fools.

Notice whom Jesus calls a *"fool"* in today's Gospel Reading. In our hearing, the story is about a man who is prudent. He sets goals for himself, plans ahead. And he achieves his goals. He gets results so good that he has to demolish his old barns and build new ones for his wonderfully abundant harvest. Then the man says to himself, *"Soul, take your ease. It's the Roaring Nineties. The Market is up. Chill!"*

We would call this man a success, a prudent businessperson. Jesus calls him *"fool."*

*"The fool says, 'There isn't a God'"* according to Psalm 53. A fool is anybody who lives as if God were not. And Jesus has called this businessman a fool. Is there a connection between the atheistic fool of the Psalms and this materialistic fool in Luke? You bet. Each of them thought they could live without God. But both of them were just fooling themselves.

And that brings us around full circle to Ananias and Sapphira who thought they could fool God and live without the power of the Holy Spirit. They too were only fooling themselves.

And please remember – it's not so much about their individual fates – it's about the community. It's about what they had to give others. It's about the Spirits that could be raised and the lives that could have been saved; a world that could have been changed through the sharing of their gifts.

In this African folk tale a Nigerian tribal chief sent out his messengers to invite all of the people of the tribe to a great feast. *"All of the food will be provided," they announced, "but each household must bring one jug of palm wine."*

One of the men of the tribe, Ezra, wanted to attend the great festival very much, but he had no wine. He paced the floor trying to think of a solution for his dilemma. His wife suggested, *"Buy a jug of wine. It is not too expensive for such a great occasion."*

*"How foolish," Ezra cried, "to spend money when there is a way to go free." Once again he paced until he came upon a plan. "Rather than wine I will carry water in my jug. Several hundred families will attend the festival. What will it hurt to add one jug of water to the great pot of wine?"*

On the day of the feast the tribal drums began to beat early in the morning, reminding the people of the great festival. All came dressed in their finest clothes, gathering by midmorning at the home of the chief. As each family entered the tribal grounds, they poured a jug of wine into a large earthen pot. Ezra carefully poured the contents of his container into the pot, greeted the chief, and joined the dancers.

When all of the guests had arrived, the chief commanded the music to cease and ordered the servants to fill everyone's glass with wine. As the chief spoke the opening words of the festival, all of the guests raised their glasses and drank. Suddenly a cry of disbelief arose from the crowd, and they quickly drank again. What they tasted was not wine, but water. It seems each guest had decided that one jug of water could not spoil the great pot of palm wine.

Do you think Ezra and all the people of that village were fools? They too thought they were fooling others. But the fact of the matter is that they were just fooling themselves.

We are entering a very tricky time in the life of our nation, our community and our families. Will we give our best in our battles with Pandemic and Political Division? Or will we let down our guards and risk a fourth wave of devastation by Covid-19 and a repeat of the violence that has been the fruit of self-serving divisiveness?

Emerging from the shadow of the Cross and into the bright light of the Resurrection, this is a good time to take a measure of our selves, of our communities, of our nation, of our world to gauge how we are serving the power of life or if we are acting like fools, like people who are dead already.

Way back before the Pandemic, I happened to pass by the chapel on a Wednesday night and heard Pastor Nick teaching the Confirmation class about the concept of *"justification by grace through faith"* – that no one earns salvation, but it comes to us as a free gift.

Nick asked the class, *"If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into Heaven?"*

*"NO!"* they answered.

Nick continued: *"How about if I got up at 4 in the morning every day and went down and cleaned Main Street to keep this city neat and tidy, would that get me into Heaven?"*

Again, the answer was, *"NO!"*

By now Nick was smiling. This was going great – they were really getting this central doctrine of our faith. *"Well, then, if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children, and loved my wife and kids, would that get me into Heaven?"*

Again, they all answered, *"NO!"*

Nick was just bursting with pride and asked them, *"How then can I get into Heaven?"*

One of them said, *“You gotta be dead.”*

By the grace of God, we are offered the gifts of spirit and life and eternal life. So let us stop fooling ourselves and let us stop trying to fool God. Let us live in a Spirit of Life not death. Amen.

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Sermon preached by Reverend Steve Savides at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin  
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