

THE HEART OF A CLOWN¹
I Corinthians 1: 18-25
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
March 15, 2009

I had every intention of opening this sermon with reference to Judy Collins' old song, *Where Are the Clowns?* But somewhere along the way I discovered a song entitled *The Heart of a Clown* that will be familiar only with those of you who are aficionados of country music. It was written by Gene Watson and sung by the inimitable Willie Nelson, and it is about the standard country music subject of the jilted lover whose heart is breaking, but he paints a smile on his face while he longs for her embrace. But then comes a line that caught my attention: "And I'd sing as my dream world tumbled down, if I had the heart of a clown."

I
On this third Sunday of Lent, 2009, when the world so many thought they knew a year ago seems to be tumbling down, we hear a word from the Apostle Paul that sounds for all the world like a clown: *But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.* We might seem to some like a bunch of clowns to gather here on a Sunday morning and sing hymns of praise at a time like this! *For God's foolishness, says Paul, is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

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If we seem foolish, we come by it honestly. It is in our spiritual genetic makeup. A silly old man named Noah is building an ark while his wise friends tell him that it hasn't flooded around here in years. Sarah, well past her 90th birthday, is falling on her face in laughter when she hears that she is going to have a baby. A hot-headed murderer named Moses who speaks with a lisp is asked to speak for God to Pharaoh and say "Let my people go." A little kid named David with five smooth river rocks walks out to face a giant of the Philistines named Goliath. Ruth, a Moabite, shakes up local traditions with an interracial marriage to an Israelite, and then when her husband dies, she sticks with her mother-in-law come hell or high water. The prophet Ezekiel eats a copy of the Torah to demonstrate how sweet the word of God is. The prophet Nathan is crazy enough to tell King David to his face that he is a crook and an adulterer. To a person they all seem to have the heart of a clown. And that's just the Old Testament!

What of Simon Peter in the New Testament! On today and off tomorrow, exhibiting all the human emotions from tears to laughter, always ready with an answer even when he didn't know what he was talking about, confessing Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God in the morning but cursing in the darkness, "I never knew the man." And yet, Jesus says, it is upon people like you, Peter, that I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

And so he called them: tax collectors, revolutionaries, public sinners, Wall Street traders, soccer moms, gluttons and attenders of AA meetings, assembly line workers and Starbucks barristas, kids and elderly, and all the rest.

And what about those who have followed his teachings over the centuries! The church has always been a mixture of the all kinds of people. There is the memory of St. Francis of Assisi, a mad man in the view of the establishment, stripping off his clothes to embrace poverty, preaching to the birds in simplicity, living with the leper in humility. Or we remember Martin Luther and how foolish he seemed when he stood up to the Pope himself. But Martin Luther, against all the established wisdom, was foolish enough to think he could change that corrupt system.

And then there was James Wilson, one of the unsung heroes of the faith. A local postmaster here in Worcester, he had the courage to think that he could establish a Baptist church in a town that already had two churches, one too many in the minds of many. Yet James Wilson was foolish enough to think that a Baptist church, with its unique witness to the faith, could survive and flourish in a promising town like Worcester, and over great opposition, he founded a church here in 1812.

And how many times during those 197 years has someone gravely wondered if we would still be here a decade later, much less 200 years

later? But that congregation had enough people in it who looked beyond the bottom line, beyond the attendance figures, beyond the budget, beyond the failures of nerve, beyond the foibles of its ministers, beyond disputes among members, beyond all obstacles before them, and concluded that God still had a purpose and a plan and a witness for this unique congregation in Worcester. The world needed this church then, and needs this church now! And here we are!

II

Speaking of being called to do something important, look at the story we read from the gospel of Matthew today. Jesus tells about a father who comes to the first of two sons and says, *Son, go and work in the vineyard today*. And immediately the boy replies, *%Sure, I'll go. You can count on me, Dad. I'll go where you want me to go.*+ So he presumably walks off singing the hymn,

I'll go where you want me to go, dear Lord,
 Over mountain or plain or sea;
 I'll say what you want me to say, dear Lord,
 I'll be what you want me to be.²

BUTō he said he would go; then he didn't! %Lord, I'll goō +but he wouldn't.

Then Jesus says that there was another son who, when asked by his father to go work in the vineyard, said, *%Not me! Not a chance! I'll do what I want when I want to.*+ And presumably he walked off singing *%Did It My*

² Mary Brown and Charles E. Pryor, *%I'll Go Where You Want Me to Go.*+

Way.+ But somewhere along the way he thought about what his father had asked him to do, and he changed his mind. He went out to work in the vineyard.

So then Jesus asked the religious people who were hearing him tell this story, %Which of the two did the will of his father?+ And clearly they know the answer: %It was the son who chose to work in the vineyard,+they say. And then comes the message: *Truly I tell you, tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom ahead of you.* It was the unexpected ones, the surprising ones, the ones who initially said no, who had faith and went.

The church knows both sons well. The church has people who say, %Yes, Lord, I will go. I will do what you want me to do, ,+but they don't. And it also knows well those who cry out, %No, it's too foolish, too impossible, too implausible, I can't ,+but they do. They take a chance and discover the joy and adventure of the gospel. They have the heart of a clown!

That's what I really want to remind us all on this third Sunday of Lent: Christianity is not foolishness. This church will not give up on the gospel, will not be deaf to the call to follow Christ, will not miss the hope and the confidence and the joy and the peace of the gospel, will not succumb to the pressures of those who say that the *message of the cross is foolishness*, will not swallow the nonsense about religion being dead, will not live by our

greatest fears rather than our greatest faith— this church will not forget the great reality of *Christ crucified...the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

There is many a time when I look with amazement and gratitude around this place and see a church living love in a world full of hate, living forgiveness in a world full of retribution, living compassion in a world full of rancor, living justice in a world full of favoritism, living an inclusive welcome in a world full of division and exclusivity, and walking the Way of Christ when other ways are touted as more practical and wise. When we see that happen, as we often do around here, it reminds me of the great text we have read today:

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.