

Ordinary people + God = Extraordinary results

Message for Sunday, March 23, 2014
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Children's Message: from Matthew 7:21-27.

I come to church using crutches, with foot in a strap-on cast. When the children ask, "What happened?", I tell them about how much I love snow.

I'm so sad to see all our beautiful snow melting. I wanted to go skiing one last time. But all I've ever done is cross-country skiing. I thought it would be fun to try downhill skiing. I didn't want to drive all the way to Batawa, though, so I thought I would try it on Oak Hill, just south of town. The problem is, cross country skis don't give you much control over which direction you go; they're not meant for going downhill at high speeds. So when I tried swerving around this big tree, well...

April Fools! Ha ha! Fooled you! It's not broke at all.

The children object.

What? Today is not April 1? Oh yeah, I forgot that. I guess that makes me the fool, then, doesn't it? Oh well, it's not the first time.

That was pretty silly, wasn't it? But here's one place where we definitely do *not* want to be foolish: when it comes to following Jesus.

Matthew 7:26, Today's English Version:

"Anyone who hears these words of mine and does not obey them is like a foolish man who built his house on sand."

I want to make sure that I follow Jesus.

Sermon: "Ordinary people + God = Extraordinary results"

1) Be a fool for God

"You fool! How could you do something so stupid!" Most of us would cringe if those words were directed at us. Especially if we know that what we did was wrong and dangerous. But there are times when you can wear that label as a badge of honour.

Those times are when you are following in Jesus' way. There may be times when your faith in Jesus calls you to make a choice that others think is dumb, and they won't mind telling you that. The question is: would you rather be called a fool by other people, or by God?

Paul talks about how foolish God's ways seem, especially in contrast to the so-called "wisdom" of our world.

1 Corinthians 1:22-25, New Living Translation:

God's way seems foolish to the Jews because they want a sign from heaven to prove it is true. And it is foolish to the Greeks because they believe only what agrees with their own wisdom. So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended, and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense. But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the mighty power of God and the wonderful wisdom of God. This "foolish" plan of God is far wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is far stronger than the greatest of human strength.

God's ways have always seemed foolish to those whose lives are focussed on *me*, what *I* want, and *more* of it. And God's way of bringing salvation to the world, through his Son Jesus Christ, is the ultimate foolishness, as the world measures things.

For Jewish people, a criminal condemned to death on a cross was a sign of the worst kind of person. To say that Jesus was

God's Messiah was not just foolishness; it was blasphemy. It offended their ears to hear disgusting talk like that.

For the Greeks with their sophisticated philosophy, the idea that God would get personally involved in the messy lives of people on earth – that was just ridiculous. Add to that the preposterous idea that the Son of God would suffer and die for us – that was beyond ridiculous; it was simply stupid and unthinkable.

Despite all this "wisdom," God went ahead anyway. In verse 24 (the underlined part above), Paul declares:

But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the mighty power of God and the wonderful wisdom of God.

God's "foolishness" is wiser than the greatest human wisdom. God's ways are far better than any schemes we can come up with.

So if you ever have to choose between following God's way, or way that all the "experts" say is the smart way, choose God's way. Having honour in the eyes of other people may be nice, but is nowhere as important as honour in the eyes of God.

Example: The prevailing wisdom is that if you have money to pay all your bills plus some for extras and

saving, and if you have a nice home, and if you have a spouse and 2.1 children, and if you have good health, then you will be happy. You see the problem with that picture? It's all about *me*: what *I* want. The ultimate example of how this is a recipe for disaster is when people win the big lottery. Now they have money to do all the things they ever wanted. But time and again, we find that within a few years, these people have lost family and friends, and are not happy at all.

Jesus says true joy is found in staying close to him.

John 15:9-11, New Revised Standard Version:

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

That’s what the world calls foolish; but it’s actually the wisest way.

2) God’s ways are different from our ways

Let’s go skipping stones at the Mill Pond. You look for the just the right stone: perfectly round, flat and thin, light in weight. Of course, if you can’t find the perfect stone, you settle for what is available. But no one in their right mind would choose a big, square rock. All it would be good for would be “plunk!” – straight to the bottom. Anyone with common sense knows that kind of rock is useless for skipping.

And if you’re growing a church, you want good, respectable people in it. Anyone with common sense know that.

Except that’s *not* God’s plan, according to what we read in the Bible. One look at the motley crew Jesus chose for his apostles, and the kind of people he hung around with, will tell you that.

Paul writes to the church in Corinth, and reminds the people there of their background.

1 Corinthians 1:26-28, New Living Translation:

Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world’s eyes, or powerful, or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God deliberately chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose those who are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important.

Now remember what you were, my friends, when God called you. From the human point of view few of you were wise or powerful or of high social standing. God purposely chose what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise, and he chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful. He chose what the world looks down on and despises and thinks is nothing, in order to destroy what the world thinks is important.

Common sense tells you that the people who started the church in that town were the worst kind of building material for a church. But God looked over the rest, and chose them.

It wasn’t that God simply made use of what was available. There were many other people in the city of Corinth—educated, wealthy, influential—who presumably would have been valuable assets to a new church. No: God *chose* the weak and foolish and lowly.

What an amazing thing! How different from our ways are the ways of God. How unsearchable his riches.

God is the one who works wonders in the world. God can take a person whom others consider worthless, and create a masterpiece!

3) Think of no one as lesser than yourself

The practical result of this principle is that you think of no one as lesser than yourself. If you look down on anyone, thinking that they have really made a mess of their lives, then that simply shows how small and immature your faith is. Do you dare to despise what is cherished by God? Are you ashamed of the people who may be vessels used by God?

The lowly things and people of the world (by human standards) may be the very ones chosen by God for his greatest works. Learn to look at people as God sees them, and discover the potential that lies there—a masterpiece!

William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, often used as his challenge to church leaders: “Go for souls, and go for the worst.” When I lived in Prince Edward County, there were a lot of churches in Picton with lots of good, respectable people in them. Larry Snider started a new church with one sole motive: to reach the people who felt they couldn’t belong in the “nice” churches. I honour Larry for that. I get a similar impression here at St. Paul’s Church. Everyone is welcome here, no matter who you are, or what your life has been like.

Question: Does this mean that a person of wealth or status, or a person in a position of power, or a person of wisdom or strength (in the world's eyes), cannot be useful to God?

Answer: No. The theme of this whole passage is humility. If a person of wealth or power or prestige is full of pride – “Aren't you glad I'm on your team, God?” – then God can't do much with that person. But if the person is humble and says, “Here I am, God, ready to serve wherever you need me,” then wonderful things can happen.

Look at people through God's eyes, not through the standards of this world.

The Touch of the Master's Hand – by Myra Brooks Welch

'Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin,
But he held it up with a smile.
“What am I bidden, good folks,” he cried,
“Who will start bidding for me?
A dollar, a dollar”— then, “Two!” “Only two?
Two dollars, and who'll make it three?
Three dollars, once; three dollars, twice;
Going for three—” But no,
From the room, far back, a gray-haired man
Came forward and picked up the bow;
Then, wiping the dust from the old violin,
And tightening the loose strings,
He played a melody pure and sweet
As sweet as a carolling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer,
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said, “What am I bidden for the old violin?”
And he held it up with the bow.
“A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two?
Two thousand! And who'll make it three?
Three thousand, once; three thousand, twice;
And going, and gone!” said he.
The people cheered, but some of them cried,
“We do not quite understand;
What changed its worth?” Swift came the reply:
“The touch of the master's hand.”

And many a man with life out of tune,
And battered and scattered with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd,
Much like the old violin.
A “mess of pottage,” a glass of wine;
A game — and he travels on.
He's “going” once, and “going” twice,
He's “going” and “almost gone.”

But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd
Never can quite understand
The worth of a soul, and the change that's
wrought
By the touch of the Master's hand.

Learn to look at people as God sees them, and discover the potential that lies there—a masterpiece! As followers of Jesus, we are so thankful that Jesus doesn't give up on us. And that's exactly how we must look at others.

Next Steps:

- Have you ever done something foolish because of Jesus? Tell your story to someone else. They may have a story to tell you. Encourage one another to keep on being foolish for Jesus.¹
- Do you look down on anyone? You'd feel uncomfortable sitting next to that person in church? If so, you need to repent of your pride. Next you need to invite that person to church.

¹ This is not bragging about yourself. It's more like, “This is how Jesus is working in my life, and it's exciting!”