

The Toil of Fools
 A Very Foolish Journey, Part 1
 Ecclesiastes 10:12-14
 February 18, 2018, the First Sunday in Lent
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Ah, Mr. Bean, you fool! You wonderful and somehow wise fool. I'm not sure when you were born, but I know Rowan Atkinson of County Durham in England gave birth to you around the time he was working towards a Masters degree at Oxford University. I'm glad I've met you countless times on video screens. And I'm particularly thankful for the one episode when you toiled to properly be in church.

But it was so hard for you. You walked in during the singing of a hymn. And as soon as you got hold of a hymnal, the music stopped and everyone sat down.



You dutifully followed the unspoken protocol but then suffered trying to keep your attention on the pastor's words. Oh, and when you sneezed aloud without the benefit of a sleeve, handkerchief or tissue, I truly felt bad for you. At least you found the lining of your coat to wipe your nose.

Sure, then you dozed off. A few times. But seeing you startle awake was like a little Lazarus miracle. And then you opened your eyes so you could see!



I have to thank you for being so discreet when opening that candy wrapper calling your name in the middle of the service. Oh, and bless your heart, you were trying so hard to figure out when to stand when the organ piped up again for the next hymn. I blame everyone else for being too slow.

At least the service ended with the perfect hymn for you – "All Creatures of our God and King." Perfect because you, Mr. Bean, are a beloved child of God even though you are such a profoundly foolish creature.

We all have a bit of Mr. Bean inside of us. Some of us more than others. Especially Mr. Bean in church. His foolishness holds up a mirror for us to examine expectations we have of ourselves and others. The goal of this sermon series "A Very Foolish Journey" is to help us better understand our foolishness. Our Lenten journey to Easter is a fruitful opportunity to examine and to turn away from faithless foolishness so each of us can move forward full throttle into becoming fools for Christ.

I believe the best to start this journey is by looking at the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel. This could be a sermon series in an of itself. So let's just say it's time to briefly turn, turn, turn to Ecclesiastes.



The word "Ecclesiastes" refers to the function of speaking or preaching. Think of the professional wisdom teacher King Solomon performing this function to the assembled leaders of Israel in Jerusalem, for he is credited in Ecclesiastes 1:1 with preaching this collection. It certainly isn't a sermon in the usual sense. I learned in seminary that it's more of a rambling lecture about the meaning of life. It rambles in two particularly distinct directions.

One direction is south into sorrow. The kind of sorrow that sobers you up from intoxicating notions of power and immortality. There are quite a few words wrapped in melancholy and fastened to an inescapable sense of futility. This is all the talk about how all the toiling we human beings endure is nothing but vanity. We don't ultimately gain anything from it, in time we're all going to die, and we are foolish each time we place too high a value on human wisdom. All that the practical wisdom in this world does for powerful rulers and powerless paupers alike is to raise a fatalistic awareness of our mortal limitations. In this sober estate we cannot possibly hope to become truly wise to the sovereign ways of God. We are fools not to accept our finite limitations. This only leads to prideful behavior with too often bad and downright wicked consequences. And then we rightly feel foolish when God's Word reprimands us. The best we can do is be wise enough to just enjoy the present by not spending too much time pondering the future. In an honest way this practical, sobering assessment is really quite helpful -- for as many folks know (myself certainly included), it can be foolish not to let go and let God while taking life one day at a time.

The other direction is true north. Rather than foolishly spending our lives lamenting about our human limitations and suffering sinful consequences, we are wise to constantly lift-up praise and glory to God. By doing so we realize all helpful human wisdom is a gift from God and never a human achievement. Rather than turning in foolish circles, we can each move forward toward fulfillment of God's good and wise purposes. We don't have a prayer of knowing this divine wisdom in full. And that's certainly not our place as children of God. Ours is a place of faithful obedience, trusting in God's good power and redemption plan for our lives and this whole world. Being wise instead of foolish, then, is not just the key to proper ethical behavior. It's about having a praising perspective that seeks out the divine plan behind all of creation.

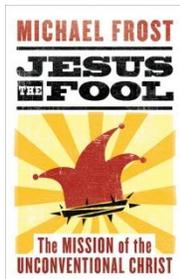
Above all, Ecclesiastes insists that human wisdom has little to do with how smart any of us are or what our social positions are or whether we know all the proper Presbyterian doctrine. Fools aren't defined by a lack of intelligence. Fools are defined for toiling away at their own vanity before choosing to seek God's eternal wisdom as expressed through historic faith community.

And I have to say that I find the point made in Ecclesiastes 10:14 especially poignant. Fools talk on and on and on. More biblically speaking, we could say they Babylon (you can groan now at the pun).



The point is that foolish speech ends up consuming the person whose lips deliver it, and then they grow weary, get lost, and quite possibly go mad. Speech should instead build up the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. It should help lead people home to the Lord.

Edi Geissler understands this. He owns a cobbler shop in a beautiful village south of Bern, Switzerland. But as a devout Christian, he also has a passion for hospitality. And so he one day made a particularly wise choice. He converted his workshop into a bistro with a relaxed and creative atmosphere. It's the kind of place where you can't help but focus on the present moments before you as various discussions and concerts and art exhibitions are held. Seems to me it's a place of vitality more than vanity!



I learned of Edi Geissler in a wonderful book by author Michael Frost titled Jesus the Fool: The Mission of the Unconventional Christ. Frost declares that "in the name of Jesus" this man "is breathing life into the village of Steffisburg."

We are all fools from time to time. But may we never become fools full of futility who toil and talk in ways that deny our human limitations and thus fail to glorify God's creative, life-giving presence and wisdom each day.

Next week is Scout Sunday. You'll get to enjoy a special skit sermon about the folly of disobedience, of going against the wisdom found in Scout guides as well as the Good Book. I'll be helping out with this. My sermon series will continue on March 4th with a message based on Isaiah 32:1-8 titled "The Coming King of Fools." Amen.