

Foolish Academics for Christ
6 Easter
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St. Thomas's Anglican Church, Toronto,
Acts 17:22-31

Like many people around the world, I rather think of Toronto as a sort of “Athens on Lake Ontario.” Every Sunday, I’m keenly aware that a sizeable majority of this congregation are either working on advanced degrees or already hold them. Our connection with the University of Toronto and other centres of learning in this city means that our pews are always full of academics, librarians, and lots of really smart people. I’m always so impressed by the sheer *competence* of my parishioners.

So perhaps you all can appreciate Paul’s majestic oration before the philosophers in front of the Athenian Areopagus. As many of you know, I went to a little school in the States, St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland, whose sole curriculum was the Great Books Program, and I spent the first two years learning ancient Greek and translating the dialogues of Plato. There is still something of the classicist in me. Just before the reading we heard this morning, in the prologue to Paul’s philosophical address, Luke explains,

Paul...was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued...in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, “What does this babblers want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.” [I love that academic “he seems”]...So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” [And then we get this priceless aside:] Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Next follows the speech we heard as our first lesson this morning, after which Luke notes, “When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’” Paul makes a few converts and then heads on to Corinth, where he stays for a year and a half.

I had never given the context of this passage much thought until I came across a remarkable bit of commentary by Brennan Manning, who in *The Importance of Being Foolish: How to Think Like Jesus* (All quotes taken from pp. 155-156, emphasis added) writes,

When Paul arrived at Corinth, he had just left Athens. He was *discouraged* by his failure to win over the Greek community there through the use of natural theology. In speaking to the uncultured Corinthians... Paul completely abandoned the *wordy wisdom* approach and preached the folly of the Cross. “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

All these years, I had been impressed by Paul’s Athenian erudition, his command of the art of rhetoric. He is sly and subtle when he quotes pagan poetry in support of his message. And yet the result? True, he makes a *few* converts, but for the most part his efforts fall flat. It isn’t until he abandons the urbane, sophisticated mode of proclamation that he begins to see tangible results. Not until he decides to give up his pretensions and be a fool for Christ’s sake do people begin to respond to the message of salvation.

Based on what Paul says about himself in several of his epistles, we know that he took great pride in his reputation for learning and eloquence. Paul was, after all, the student of Gamaliel the Pharisee, and a Roman citizen. But I think his experience in Athens opened his eyes to the fact that he was relying too much for his sense of self-worth on how other people saw him. The message he was proclaiming took a back seat to the person proclaiming it. He didn't just want people to be impressed by Jesus; he wanted them to be impressed by *him*, too.

And Paul is undoubtedly impressive, *even* when he acts as a fool for Christ. But the difference is that *when* he decides to be a fool for Christ, it ceases to matter to him what others think of him, and he is able to keep the main thing the main thing: God's infinite love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord. So whether people are impressed by him or not, he is able to plant the seed of the gospel more effectively because he has gotten out of the way and lets the message speak for itself.

Maybe the key to being an effective evangelist is letting go of our fear of appearing foolish and constantly worrying about other peoples' opinions of us, and instead remembering that the only opinion that matters is God's. If we can do *that*, then I think we will find that we have every reason for confidence and hope, because we are assured time and again that God's opinion of us isn't based on how smart, or good, or sophisticated, or nice we are, but on how much God loves us. We are good enough for God, even when we *are* absolute fools.

In my own experience as an evangelist—a word few people are comfortable claiming—my biggest obstacle has always been embarrassment. As I've mentioned before, I grew up the son of an evangelical pastor, and I was always told that it was my duty to invite people to church, especially those who didn't know the Lord. Problem was, I went to the church school and everyone I knew was already a member of my church! So for much of my childhood and adolescence, I was able to let myself off the hook on the premise that the only people I knew were already committed Christians.

It wasn't until I reached college that the challenge of being an evangelical came to the forefront. And there, I found a conundrum. Did I really need to invite my Jewish and non-Christian friends to church? Did I really need to tell them that if they didn't accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour that they were going to hell? It was just so *embarrassing* to share my faith—particularly when I wasn't at all sure that I had complete confidence in the absolutist tenets of that particular version of Christianity.

So it was a great relief to become an Anglican midway through college and not have to worry about evangelism any more!

Such did not, however, turn out to be the case. In fact, something rather strange happened. As soon as I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church, I became a *true* evangelical. Sacramentally, this makes sense, if we remember that confirmation isn't just a rite of passage but the gift of the Holy Spirit, a little Pentecost that is intended to fill the recipient with apostolic zeal. As soon as I became an Episcopalian, I couldn't wait to tell my friends what had happened to me.

And what happened was that, as a budding high churchman, I had discovered how to pray. I had discovered the joy of worshiping God in music and liturgy. I had discovered that the purpose of the

Christian life was more than just making converts, but about being ever more deeply converted to the way of love that Jesus shows us in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

You know what I did? I took out an ad in the college newspaper saying that if folks wanted to accompany me to church on Sunday, they could meet me at eleven o'clock on the Quad. I took out another ad saying that if folks wanted to pray Evening Prayer with me, they could drop by my dorm room before dinner every night. I took out another ad saying that if anyone didn't have plans for Thanksgiving or Long Weekend, I'd be spending it with some Benedictine monks and they were welcome to come along (particularly if they were willing to chip in a few bucks for gas), and that they wouldn't be required to go to any services—they could just do as they pleased. And you know what? People came to church with me. A guy showed up every night to pray with me before dinner. I sometimes had half a dozen or more fellow students accompany me to the monastery. I didn't care *what* people thought of me: this was fun, this was meaningful, and it was freely available to all comers.

In *Do You Hear What I Hear? An Unreligious Writer Investigates Religious Calling*, Minna Proctor, a secular Jew, writes, "When you're convinced that something is good, it's difficult not to want to share it. The evangelical phrase 'Go forth and share the good news' is a perfect expression of this idea." That's exactly what I found myself doing. I didn't do it to score brownie points with God, or to add notches to my crucifix for every conversion scored, but so that people would know that something *good* was there for the taking. Those who wanted it partook of it, and those who didn't, didn't.

Most of the time, I suspect we don't share the good things in our lives because we're afraid of being ridiculed or looked down upon or embarrassed. We may not want to offend by talking about "religious" things. We may think we need to keep our private lives private. And besides, we may have a hard time imagining that there's anyone who would *want* to hear what we have to say, if we even knew *what* to say in the first place. But we all need to be *available* to others and willing to share the good things we know, even if it makes us feel or look a little foolish.

So...are *we* willing to be fools for Christ? Or is it more important that other people think well of us? When it comes to the most important and meaningful questions of all, the sort of questions that pull us into Church and push us onto our knees, is it more important to save face or keep the faith?

Following God's call *can* mean that we end up embarrassing ourselves. But even if we *do* embarrass ourselves, what's the worst that can happen? It can't be as bad as giving a big speech on the Areopagus and flopping, or preaching a sermon on evangelism to academic Anglo-Catholics that might be completely ineffective come Monday morning.