

A Homily by
The Reverend Jo Popham

“being a fool for Christ”
2nd Sunday after Pentecost – June 6, 2021
Mark 3: 30-35

Some of you may know that we had hoped to have all our children their spouses, and the grandchildren here this summer on the anniversary of our honeymoon here 35 years ago, marking among other things the beginning of our relationship with St. Andrew’s By-the-Sea. Our dream of a reunion will not happen this summer, but we hope it will in the near future. And it will be a joyful celebration whenever it happens. A few weeks ago much of my family gathered in Louisiana to visit with a recently widowed niece and her children from Washington state. Two of my brothers and their wives and extended families were there as well. It was not a very joy-filled time. Our lives have taken very different directions. Often in the past our reunions were at our home, but we gave up our home when we went to seminary to live into our vocations. Our move from Cherry Island involved all 5 children, 8 movers, 2 boats, 2 moving vans, 5 U-hauls for the children to take furniture and furnishings, and a couple hundred bottles of ice water. It was a show. We should have sold tickets. The family must have thought us crazy to give up our life style and our life on the island. One of the children asked “Papa, does this mean you are giving up on the Good Life?” Jim and I thought that living into our callings to serve God as our life’s work was the Good Life. Yes, we had changed. Perhaps my family changed as well, because it is never peaceful when we are all together with father pitted against daughter, grandfather against grandchild, brothers against sister, sister-in-law against brother-in-law with critical language even with regard to what we call sacred – one another’s beliefs and faith. Of course I love my family, but they are not the people I once I knew. On the other hand, whenever our children are all together – most recently on Zoom – they drop into their younger selves and spend most of their time laughing with one another recalling the good times when we were all together appearing to be exactly who we remember them to be and yet better as they have developed in to the mature

children we know and love. Yet they all – both sets of my family – continue to develop and grow their faith. Their journeys continue as they evolve.

Our faith journeys may have begun with God meeting our basic needs, with people praying for our healing perhaps, even our growth. It was probably then that we learned to pray ourselves. We were introduced to the Kingdom of God. Then we likely were invited and encouraged to pray regularly; we were invited to belong to a faith community. It was then that we probably met the Lord in Scripture and through learning from others who had more experience in church than we. We learned more and more about God's Kingdom. Discipleship most likely followed at a time when we began to see and act on opportunities to live the Gospel in the world – we engaged in activities to bring about the Kingdom of God right here on earth. Some then go deeper and grow their faith through spiritual practices and holy habits, to feed the Kingdom within us. And some then put their lives into the service of God tending to those who come to them to meet their basic needs and to journey with them. Jim and I were ordained to the priesthood 12 years ago today – June 6th. Our journey had taken an unsuspected turn the summer we graduated with our Masters of Divinity. We lost our home and ministry opportunities in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina when 8 feet of flood water inundated our neighborhood. But our faith was strengthened on our convoluted journey towards living into our callings. God put us in situations we never would have considered where people needed us most while we were wandering Arameans. We learned what most priests never learn – how to let people love and care for us. And we were agents of change in many peoples' lives.

In the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus had gone through some radical changes, so much so that people didn't even recognize who he was. His own family thought that he had "gone out of his mind." They were ready to stage an intervention; they tried to restrain him. What made them think that? Well, he had left the security of the carpenter's shop where his family had a flourishing business to become a wandering preacher. Jesus had gone from living a comfortable (though likely a conflicted) life to having no place to lay his head. He surely had caused trouble with 1st century orthodox leaders. Who in their right mind would take on the Scribes and Pharisees? And what about the people he

surrounded himself with – fishermen who were as crazy as he was. They themselves had left their boats and livelihoods... and there was that reformed tax collector Matthew who had been in the employ of the Romans, and even a radical Jewish Nationalist – Simon who Biblical scholars believe was a member of the tax-hating Zealots who hated anyone and everyone who worked for Rome. Jesus had walked away from security, safety, and it seemed as though he cared little for what society expected of a man. Did he worry about “what people would say?” He surely did not listen to the voice of his friends and family and neighbors, but he listened to God’s voice. He did not worry about where the people around him thought his power came from. No, Jesus simply tackled problems knowing that the power of God was stronger than the power of evil – evil by whatever name the people – or we –put on it. Jesus went about saving people’s bodies as well as peoples’ souls – healing both – rather than worrying about who or what caused the person’s illness. And our Lord taught his own do the right thing – how to deal with evil and to take on the problem practically instead of becoming weighed down with the possible causes.

The noted Biblical scholar William Barclay puts it this way: “suppose a man wakes up to find his house on fire, he does not sit down in a chair and embark upon the reading of a treatise entitled “ The Origin of Fires in Private Houses.” He grabs such defenses as he can muster and deals with the fire.”¹ He dealt with what I call “practical and needful things.” Like our Lord and the disciples, we must muster what faculties we have to do what is necessary to put out the fire – to heal one another’s ills – spiritual and otherwise.

The Christian community and our family here at St. Andrew’s By-the-Sea need to bravely find ways to deal with the turns in our faith journeys. We are not Jesus Christ, but he is our model of courage and fool-heartiness. Brennan Manning wrote “In the eyes of the world, Jesus was a fool. He did not abide by the rules of his day; the people he associated with were shunned by society; his Sermon on the Mount reads like a primer on being left behind, stepped on, and ignored. In order for us to truly be the people Jesus wants us to be, we too must learn to become foolish.”²

Yes, we need to learn to become fools for Christ to grow our faith and support the faith of others. And perhaps we need to put down some of our baggage – our possessions and the emotional stuff we carry around – so that we can navigate our faith journeys more lightly, though I do not recommend you do this by filling your house with 8 feet of water. Yes, we adults do have baggage, but we should not think of our life experiences as impediments to our sharing the Kingdom of God. We in the church have plenty of life experiences that may not be so easy to share. But isn't it often conflict or confusion that makes us think and reevaluate what we know and think about God? Haven't we all prayed and prayed for something and felt as though God never answered us? That would prompt anyone to think hard about God. Have we ever felt as though we simply could not cope with a situation? Didn't we wonder: "How could God let this happen?" How could God allow so many to suffer and many to die during these last 16 months? Surely the Covid pandemic has made us question and search our hearts. Hard times make us go deeper into what we believe. And sharing stories of difficult times gives us commonality with others who just may need our prompting to go deeper into their faith, maybe even letting go of "stuff."

My friends, God loves us in and through every stage of our faith journey. Wherever we are at any given point of time, be assured that God is with us. It is life experiences – good and bad – joyful and sad – that grow our faith – that grow what we believe about God. And it is our own life experiences – even the craziness we have lived through – that we can share with others who can then see God at work in their own complicated lives. And that will grow the Kingdom. I pray that God will give me – and give us – the courage and the foolishness – to let the stuff of human life grow our faith.

Lord, may it be so.

Amen.

¹ William Barclay's Daily Study Bible on Mark 3,
<https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/mark-3.html>.

² Brennan Manning, *The Importance of Being Foolish: How to Think Like Jesus*.