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"Holy Fools" The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (06/23/2024, The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost)

I don't know if you know this, but people in other parts of the country and other parts of the world don't always act like people in the South.

And I know this because the first time I had really traveled I was in high school and my brother had a summer job in Fort Collins, Colorado. And so we set out from North Louisiana and we drove two full days. And at some point when we got to Colorado we sat down in a restaurant and we did what any good Southern Baptist family does.

We held hands and we prayed before we ate our meal.

And I remember hearing like audible gasps from people who were seated around us and maybe, oh my God, what are they doing as well?

And I realized at that point that not everybody did things the way that we did them, right?

That this was something that was actually kind of a social taboo.

It was certainly out of the norm.

Another thing that southerners will do that they find in other parts of the world and in other parts of the country is not as common or acceptable.

To ask people questions when you meet them the very first time about their family or about their health or about how things are going.

And often that can be sort of a source of tension, right?

When people sort of recoil a little bit from that.

So I have a couple of stories to share with you.

Recently on NPR there's a series through the Hidden Brain and the series is called Unsung Heroes.

So they try to find a person and interview them about a person who had a lasting impact on their life.

And so this is a pretty simple story but it's about this woman, Mary Fran Lyons.

And about 20 years ago she was in a mall at the food court seated there and she was in the middle of going through chemotherapy for cancer.

And so she was completely bald and she had a baseball cap on.

So when approached her another woman and said I've been sent to tell you that you're going to be okay.

Wow, you know again like that could be seen as really socially transgressive to just walk up to someone to make all kinds of assumptions and then just to tell them this thing.

But this is what happens. There were a few seconds of stunned and awkward silence as you might expect.

And then the woman said one more time you're going to be okay.

And then she left. And Mary Fran never saw her again.

Whether you think that this is rude or inappropriate or a little crazy

or a little over the top or socially awkward to say something like this to a complete stranger to Mary Fran.

This person was an angel. This person was a messenger of God and she has treasured this exchange in her heart for the last 20 years.

She believes that someone somehow was sent to give her hope when she really needed it when she was in the midst of a raging storm all around her.

Even if it was somewhat awkward and strange and even if it crossed some social boundaries.

Often whether we receive good news or bad news from someone whether we're getting encouragement or warning from someone that person who is bringing news can sometimes be seen as strange or foolish.

Somehow beyond the boundaries of what we consider to be good and proper behavior.

I'll give you one more example.

This is Bishop Stephen Charleston of the Episcopal Church. He's now a retired bishop.

He's a Native American Episcopal priest and he wrote a book recently called *We Survived the End of the World*.

And he is talking of course about his own people and how they survived their own apocalypse of sorts in the 18th century with the arrival of European settlers.

And within that context there were people in those Native communities who were acting as prophets and who were speaking very uncomfortable messages that nevertheless the people were afraid to hear.

One of those prophets that Charleston writes about Ganiodayo. He turned upside down the cultural values of the people.

He made them more connected socially, less individualistic. He helped them to get ready for the changes, the upheavals that were about to happen in their culture.

But he was crazy. People didn't want to hear what he had to say.

People didn't want to believe what he had to say.

So both of these examples illustrate to me what Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, calls the foolishness of God.

And the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom. As Paul says, God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

This message of the gospel, this reality of God coming to us in the flesh and loving us and forgiving us and setting us free from guilt and shame.

And the teachings of Jesus about loving our enemies and praying for the ones who are persecuting us.

This is foolishness. This is utter ridiculousness in the values of the world around us.

The ways of God will always seem backward and strange and foolish, a waste of time and energy to the world.

And even to us sometimes, but in them, in God's foolishness, we find life.

That is where life is found.

And so I want to tell you a story this morning about a holy fool named Alben.

The year was 304 and if you lived in what today we call England at that time, you were living in a conquered territory. The Romans had been ruling for at least a couple of hundred years by this point in a land that they called Britannia. And in that land in a town that the Romans called Verilemum, you can see the big arrow pointing to it here, lived this man called Albin. He was a Roman. He had a Roman name, and though we don't know much about him, we know that if you are a Roman and written at this time, you probably had a certain set of values that you subscribed to. You knew that even in a far-flung corner of the empire like Britain, that the Emperor was a God among humans, that he demanded and deserved total and complete devotion. You knew that the power and the wealth and the growth of Rome had been challenged in various ways, though, especially by this annoying group of people called Christians. You continued to insist in spite of every piece of evidence to the contrary that Jesus Christ, a dead and very Jewish preacher, was actually the Lord and Savior of the entire universe. Perhaps in those very early years of the fourth century you might have learned that Diocletian pictured here on this coin, the true Lord and Savior of the universe you would have thought as a Roman, was trying as many of his predecessors had to stamp out the flames of this persistent, annoying social group, these Christians. One of the ways that he was attempting to do this was to destroy church property, and especially he went after the sacred scriptures themselves, he wanted to destroy every copy of the Bible that he could find. He also wanted to go after the priests of this new religion, because if you could get the priests, the leaders, to sacrifice to the true God, to Diocletian, rather than their fake and false God Jesus, then maybe he could make some progress in stamping these folks out. And so I'm guessing, and I'm assuming that these are some of the values that Albin had, and his life was changed by someone who was crazy, by someone who was foolish in the eyes of the world. There was a priest, he was fleeing the persecution of Diocletian, rather than sacrifice to the emperor, this priest, later called amphibulous, went on the run, and he found himself at the home of Albin seeking sanctuary. I don't know what that conversation must have been like, you know, he knocks on the door, he comes into this house, amphibulous must have been a person of great faith and of a peaceful heart, because Albin decided to shelter him from the local authorities. So this is something he did at great personal risk to himself, and so as Albin was sheltering him, amphibulous continued to pray, maybe Albin even heard amphibulous praying for his enemies as Jesus taught. Something that would have been completely unimaginable to a good Roman citizen, maybe Albin even overheard amphibulous giving thanks to God for Albin himself, someone who had made this difficult choice to shelter him in the midst of persecution. And so after a few days, Albin becomes a Christian, under

amphibulous's influence, and some days later the Romans began to close in, and Albin did something truly remarkable.

As the Romans were heading to capture amphibulous and to torture him and to kill him, Albin put on Albin's vestments, he dressed himself as the Christian priest, and he said, I'm the one you're looking for, it's me.

He said in his trial that rather than following the gods of his own nation, he would continue to worship and adore the true and living God who created all things.

And so this is the legend, the story of Saint Albin, the first martyr of Britain, the saint for whom our church is named.

And today, as we celebrate Saint Albin's day, we remember and honor this profound faith, someone who was so taken by the love of Christ that he laid down his life as Jesus said for a friend.

It's a beautiful story, it's a beautiful thing to tell and to retell, and at the same time I would imagine that most of us will never find ourselves in exactly this position that Albin faced.

And even if we did 99 out of 100 of us would probably not do what Albin did.

What's more important, I think, in this story is to think about this shift in values, this reorientation, this conversion, this turning that Albin had from these values that he once had espoused, probably since his birth, to this confrontation with Jesus, the one who upended his life, rearranged all the furniture of his heart.

He left him days, I would imagine, and perplexed, as the love of God and Jesus Christ, it was so overwhelming and powerful and beautiful that he couldn't help but follow him.

I think Albin's world was actually a world that we're familiar with as well. It was a world in which your identity was defined by your political allegiances, who you followed.

It was a world in which there were clear lines to demarcation between the people who deserved respect and people who did not.

It was a world in which failure was not an option, wealth and success in your family name is what gave you influence.

It was a world in which it was easy to be stepped on and forgotten, especially if you deviated from the norm in any way.

It was a world of division and fear, a world in which it was difficult to find and maintain friendships that were authentic and deep and true.

I think it's no accident that the values of Albin and amphibolists and the values of Paul and our reading from second Corinthians, and of course the values, the identity, the person of Jesus, whom they are all imitating, clashed mightily with the values of this world.

As soon as Paul and our reading from today says, today is the day of salvation, the day of liberation and freedom, the day in which this grace of God will come flowing into our lives,

day that we would associate with joy and peace and blessing.

He gives a list of all the ways in which he and his companions have shown their dedication to preaching this joyous message, endurance,

afflictions, hardships, calamities.

It sounds like when you have your first child, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labor, sleepless nights, and hunger.

Okay, Paul, this is great. Where are we sign up?

Most important thing Paul says in this passage is not just that they have endured all of these things.

It's that the love of God who returns all of our assumptions about what constitutes success and failure.

They sound like miserable failures these Christians do, but they are all actually resounding successes.

They are treated as imposters in the world's eyes, but God knows that they are true.

They are treated as unknown in the world's eyes, but God knows them well.

They are treated as dead to the world, but God sees them as truly alive.

They are seen as miserable and sorrowful and pathetic and losers by the world, and yet they possess the riches of God's grace.

They are seen as having nothing, but they have actually received everything.

They are seen as failures, but they are actually glorious successes. Not because of their own efforts, but because of the God who loves them.

Paul is not trying to show up the Corinthians with this list of achievements and then tell them to do the same thing, but his words are showing us that God is present and real to us in every supposed failure of our lives.

God takes the small, the poor, the weak, and helps them to conquer the most frightening and difficult things imaginable.

It is easy to say, and I certainly myself have said in the midst of life's storms and challenges along with the disciples, Jesus.

Do you not care what is happening to me?

When the disciples say, Jesus, we are dying. They are saying, our world is ending.

This is the apocalypse. Everything is ending. We will cease to exist anymore. So do something about it, Jesus.

This is too large. This is too complex. This is too intimidating. This is too overwhelming. This is beyond my capacity. This is beyond my control.

I think we are often tempted to read Jesus's reply as angry or bitter. O ye of little faith, but he is offering a forceful yet gentle reminder that the disciples are caught in this worldly tempest, this worldly way of thinking.

We are perishing. We are dying. We are being destroyed, they say. And we say, we are failing. We are not succeeding at life, Jesus.

But how quickly we all forget the one who created all things and who holds all things.

The one in whom we are always more than conquerors. The one in whom all of our failures, even our failures of faith, are turned to successes.

We focus on ourselves and what the world says about us and it is indeed easy to despair.

But our faith is found in this foolish and paradoxical hope that the God of creation is a crucified Lord, a failure, who won our own salvation through that failure, through foolishness, through weakness.

Paul says, God's power is made perfect in weakness.

I'll close with one more illustration. This is a painting from the 19th century by a Russian artist, Mikhail Nesteroff.

It's called the Soul of the People. And in it, you can see all the respectable folks, the traditional clothing and social convention, this Russian Orthodox religious procession.

And there's one figure over on the side who is standing out. I know it's a little small, but I hope that you can see him.

This is the Holy Fool. And he will have none of this, right? He's standing there half naked, just a little crazy, lifting his hands up to God in fervent prayer.

St. Alben, St. Paul, this man depicted here, all of them trying to emulate the original Holy Fool Jesus himself.

The one who calms the winds and the storms of our lives and causes us to marvel, who is this man?

Who is this person of peace amid the storms of our culture? Who is this person of grace and mercy who can forgive even me?

Who is this person of love who turns every worldly failure into heavenly success? Who is this man?

He is our Holy Fool, Jesus. Who tells all of us, each one of us, you're going to be okay. Amen.