

“Called To Be Public Fools”
September 26, 2010

Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16
Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Early in my years as a lawyer, I worked for an insurance defense firm in Santa Fe. A small firm by the standards of larger, more urban states, this law firm was the second largest in New Mexico and was very much a part of the business and political establishment of the state.

Like most establishment firms, this one was intensely hierarchical. The pecking order was clear: senior partners, junior partners, senior associates, junior associates, paralegals, secretaries, and, finally, support staff. This pecking order was clear ... and not to be violated. Although some partners did mentor some associates, there were distinct divisions among the attorneys, and the line between attorneys and all other staff was even bigger and more important. That attorney-staff dividing line was most definitely not meant to be crossed. (I think this was one of the reasons I didn't even last three years at that firm. At my first annual review, I was told I was “too friendly” with the support staff. I'm not sure, but I think that meant I knew the staff's names and was interested in getting to know them.)

In this firm, and probably in many other law firms, we were all expected to observe those boundaries separating different types of staff, to keep to our own kind, and to make sure our relationships with our own kind were harmonious enough for our work to be focused and effective. We were not to cross the borders between different groups, and we were not to rock the boat within our own group.

I'm telling you all this, so that you might understand the power of one woman's actions one day in that Santa Fe law firm, many years ago. The woman's name is Rebecca, and she worked as my secretary. The particular day I'm remembering was the day that Ted Bundy, sociopath and serial killer, was going to be executed.

A number of secretaries and other support staff had gathered near Rebecca's desk, and the mood was, in a word, festive. The women who had gathered were happy, if not elated, that Bundy was finally going to “get what he deserved.” Many of them said it was an outrage that it had taken as long as it had to get to the execution date, but at least the day had finally arrived. The conversation continued in the same upbeat vein for a little while longer. Then, during a lull in this celebration of one man's execution, Rebecca spoke. With a clear, calm voice, she simply said, “Just think how his mother must be feeling.”

In an instant, the party was over. There were a few mumbled comments, and then people drifted back to their desks. A committed Christian, a mother of two young children of whom she was fiercely protective, and a human being of deep compassion, Rebecca had risked rejection and ridicule in her one and only peer group in that hierarchy. She had dared to rock the boat by naming the truth that had been absent in that celebration of execution -- that even an utterly lost soul, a serial rapist and murderer, remains a human being who has been and still is loved, perhaps loved by his own mother and most definitely loved by God. Rebecca risked sounding like a fool and being put on the margins of the group to which she was told she *must* belong. She risked seeming like

a naïve fool in believing that since God she worshipped did not consider Ted Bundy expendable, neither could she.

On that day Rebecca was one of God's holy fools, and I'd be willing to bet that she still is. On that day, she trusted the word of God that she encountered in her own heart, and she trusted it openly, in public, with people with whom she would continue to work for months and years to come. She didn't seem to care that no one agreed with her, and she didn't seem to care that no one else had the same sense of God's word and God's movement in the world.

On that day Rebecca was clearly a descendant of the prophet Jeremiah, especially the Jeremiah we meet in this morning's reading. Just as Rebecca was the odd woman out in that celebration of execution in Santa Fe, Jeremiah is very much the odd man out in Jerusalem. With a foreign army besieging the city and King Zedekiah of Judah rallying his people to fight against the invaders, Jeremiah has counseled the king and his people to lay down their arms and let the foreigners into Jerusalem. In response to this ridiculous advice, King Zedekiah has declared Jeremiah guilty of treason – no surprise there – and has imprisoned him in the palace.

Accused of treason and confined by the king's guards within a city whose defeat and occupation he has prophesied, Jeremiah hears what might be one of the more ridiculous words of God recorded in the Bible – buy your cousin's land. Jeremiah is under arrest, the city is under siege, and the foreign army is poised to overrun Jerusalem and occupy Judah, including Anathoth. "But never mind all that," says the word of God. "Buy your cousin's land just the same. He's going to come to you and ask you to buy his field, probably so he has money to take with him into exile. When he comes to you and asks you to buy his land, just do it."

Lo and behold, Cousin Hanamel shows up on cue and asks Jeremiah to buy his field, and, lo and behold, Jeremiah does as the Spirit of God had commanded him.

What follows in this morning's reading is the most detailed business transaction recorded in the Bible.

Jeremiah says, "I weighed out the money to my cousin. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money in front of the witnesses. Then I took the sealed deed and the open copy. I gave the deed to Baruch in the presence of my cousin and the witnesses who signed the deed *and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard*. In front of all these people, I charged Baruch to take the open deed and the sealed deed and put them in a jar so they would last for a long time."

Why all the details? Why do we hear step after step of this property sale? I think all these details were preserved because they emphasize and re-emphasize and then emphasize yet again that Jeremiah was willing to do what God had instructed him to do, in front of his peers, his *people*, no matter how foolish it made him look in their eyes.

It's easy to imagine the sneering behind Jeremiah's back ... or maybe even to his face. Poor ol', crazy Jeremiah. He's already told us we should surrender to the Babylonian army, and see where that got him – put in the poky. Now he's really lost it ... buying what will soon be a worthless piece of land, land the Babylonians will probably claim for their own. Foolish, foolhardy Jeremiah

... believing that God would ask him to do such a ridiculous thing and then being crazy enough to do it.

Poor, foolish, ridiculous Jeremiah, one who dared to believe that there is far more to human life than clamoring after riches and power, far more to human life than the power and machinations of kings and armies, far more to human life than what *we* can see and do. Poor, foolish, ridiculous Jeremiah, willing to trust that sense of something *more*, that sense of God working in and through all things to care for what Jesus would call, centuries later, “the least of these” – the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the prisoner, the lost, the outcast.

Poor, foolish, ridiculous Jeremiah, putting his trust, not in his own power, but in God’s power and promises -- promises of healing, of a comforting presence, and of the never-ending movement of creation toward justice and *Shalom*. Poor, foolish, ridiculous Jeremiah, doing all of this publicly, over and over again, and having to live with the consequences within his own community, his own people.

My beloved sisters and brothers, the same mysterious, demanding Spirit of God who asked so much of Jeremiah, is here, in this place, and here, in our hearts. The same mysterious, demanding Holy Presence who moved Rebecca to remind her friends and co-workers that human beings who become serial killers remain human beings is here, in this place, and here, in our hearts.

The same Holy Mystery comes to us, beckons us, and calls us to say and to do what may seem foolish to others and even to ourselves. The Spirit calls us to gather on a hot afternoon, to celebrate and give thanks for the animals who bless our lives. The Spirit calls us not to open these sanctuary doors in two weeks and, instead, to find ways to serve, to put love and faith into action – at the Teen Parent Support Center, the Boys and Girls Club, the VOM Teen Center, and in Burlingame Hall.

The Spirit calls you and me to stay centered in compassion, hope, and trust in God, even when, *especially* when anger, intolerance, and fear seem to be shaping national and international debates and actions. The Spirit calls you and me to stay centered in grace and the power of love, especially when loving our enemies seems like a foolish, impractical, stupid thing to do. The Spirit calls you and me to risk not simply our self-images and our reputations, but to risk our very selves on the foolish idea that every human being and every part of creation are beloved of God, so that they are all meant to be *our* beloveds, too.

This week, California is set to resume state-sponsored executions, and this week God may be calling you to be a public fool and name God’s truth that human beings who murder remain beloved creations of God. This week in California and elsewhere, mothers and fathers seeking a better life for their children will be detained and deported because they are on the wrong side of an imaginary line in the sand, and God may be calling you to be a public fool and name God’s truth that we are all commanded to welcome the stranger and give food to the hungry. And this week more than one someone in this country will speak of the Muslim faith with a mixture of ignorance and hate, and God may be calling you to be a public fool and name God’s truth that Islam, like Christianity, contains both truth and distortion, and that its followers are beloved of God, too.

Be a fool for God, a fool for hope, a fool for compassion, a fool for possibility. You will join so many saints of so many faiths who have gone against the grain of wealth and power, privilege and prejudice over the centuries. Speak up for kindness, speak up for justice, speak up for the power of love. Be a fool for God, and be ready to join in the fools' party. Jeremiah's there. So is Mary Magdalene, Mahatma Gandhi, Sister Helen Prejean, and Martin Luther King. Be a fool for God and join the celebrating, foolish saints of the past, present, and future. May we all meet each other at the celebration.

Amen.

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