

Sermon for January 29, 2017 (Epiphany 4, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Psalm 15; Matthew 5:1-12

Title: God's foolishness

“To those who are called, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength” (1 Corinthians 1:24-25).

My dear friends, sister and brothers in the family of God: what does it mean for us to be an alternative community gathered around the cross?

What does it mean for us to tell all the world that we have found new life in a Messiah crucified 2000 years ago?

What does it mean for us to rejoice when we are poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungry for God, merciful, pure in heart, peace-making, and persecuted?

What does it actually mean for us to be disciples, students of Jesus in our world today?

Perhaps an analogy will help shed some light on these questions.

My whole life I have been building fires. Well, at least, my entire ADULT life.

One of the sorrows of my childhood is the fact that we did not have a fireplace.

I know it sounds silly, and petty perhaps, but I have always LOVED fires, even as a child, and I was sad that the house I grew up in did not have a fireplace.

As soon as I began to live independently as an adult, my goal has always been to have a fireplace. I LOVE fires! In fact, at the hour of my death, it is my goal to be at home sitting in front of a roaring fire.

Our cabin in New Hampshire is heated by a woodstove which we keep continually burning. Even in the summer, it is not unheard-of to have a fire going there against the chill of a cold rainy day.

But my fire-building world has just been turned upside down!

I just learned, a few weeks ago, that I have been building fires in the wrong way my entire life! OK, maybe it's too strong to say “the wrong way”.

But, like everyone I have ever known, I was taught that you build a fire from the bottom up. Right? Paper and starter sticks and kindling goes on the bottom, underneath the larger, heavier logs which are up on top.

This is what I have always known to be true. The obvious way of things.

And it does work, believe me.

But guess what? That is NOT the best way to start a fire!

A few weeks ago, someone I generally trust sent me a link to a YouTube video and explained that the best way to start a fire is actually ON TOP!

Can you believe it? I was VERY skeptical, but I watched it. And it seemed to work.

And then I tried it for myself. And it worked! IT IS TRUE!

The BEST way to build a fire is the absolute reverse of what I've always done!

It's the exact opposite of what I've always KNOWN with certainty to be true!

The largest logs go on the bottom and the small stuff goes on top. Light the stuff on top, and it works like a charm!

Now, please listen: how is it possible to be so wrong about something that I have been so sure of my entire life?

If a fellow had told me at coffee hour that he starts his fire ON TOP of his woodpile, I would have laughed at him. And most certainly looked down on him!

Probably not to his face. I would have been polite and given a little smile and said, "Oh, how interesting."

But inside and behind his back, I would have scorned him.

In my mind, a man who does not know how to build a fire is like a teenager who doesn't know how to tie her shoes. I'm just being honest with you, OK?

I would have thought: "Oh poor John, what a shame. He is such a fool that he starts his fire on TOP of his woodpile! Ha! Can you believe that? How sad it is that he doesn't even know how to start a real fire!"

And all the while, I was the one who did not know.

(Here is a link to watch for yourself:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sx4gvg5f0gU>)

My friends, let us consider that THIS is what being the Church is like!

What is it that Saint Paul said? "To those who are called, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God."

WE have been called – each one of us – to explain to our families, our friends and neighbors – and to show them – that what they have always known to be power is NOT actually power. And what they have known to be wisdom is NOT actually wisdom.

Our neighbors carry on each and every day certain that they know how the world works, and how life is to be lived, and certain that they know what the good life is and how to find it.

And the Lord calls us to let them know that there IS a better way, a divine way which they are inclined to laugh at and to scorn and to think of as naïve and impossible.

How can the meek inherit the earth?

How can the merciful be the truly blessed ones?

How can it be better to turn the other cheek and to love your enemies?

How can we be happy when we are persecuted and harassed for doing what is right, rather than working hard to protect ourselves and our security?

Human society tells us all how to live and achieve the good life.

It's a fairly standard line and we all know it by heart.

Work harder than everyone else. Fight harder than others.

Grab more power than those around you.

Shout louder than your opponents.

Defend yourself at every turn.

Protect every advantage that you have.

Cover up every fault. Get rid of every wrinkle. Never let them see you sweat.

Make sure to save and plan ahead for every contingency.

Stay close to those who look and speak like you.

Be careful. Always be protected from danger or harm.

Be safe and secure and well fed, with plenty of money saved for retirement, and then you will be happy.

But the Lord Jesus comes along and says to everyone, "Start your fire ON TOP!"

He says:

Never boast in what you do, but only in what God does.

Sell your possessions and give them away to the poor.

You are blessed and happy when you are most in need.

Forgive others first if you want to be forgiven.

Never take, but always ask, seek and knock.

Change your way of thinking and you will find life everlasting!

To be honest, I don't think that I would have ever tried something that sounds so crazy as starting a fire on top of a woodpile, unless I had seen it done by someone else. Thank God for YouTube, I guess!

Well, my beloved community, THAT is what it means to be the Church.

No one is just going to believe that it is actually better to give than to receive until they see it in action – in us!

We have to BE the YouTube video. We have to BE the demonstration plot. We are called to be the living experiment which gives everyone a glimpse into a different reality, based on an entirely different set of assumptions – based on the kingdom of heaven.

In his letter called “The Joy of the Gospel”, Pope Francis spoke of the calling of the Church in this way:

“Life grows by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others” (Paragraph 10.)

So what does it mean for us to be an alternative community gathered around the cross?

It means that we are willing to leave security on the shore, willing to take risks so that we can labor together with Christ in communicating life to others – true life, real life, eternal life!

THIS is what it means to be Saint Mary's. This is who we are.

Thanks be to God that we have been called together for this purpose, to bear witness to the foolishness and the weakness of God.

May we always be faithful to this task. Amen.