

PRINCIPALITIES, POWERS, AND FOOLS DOES PREACHING MAKE AN ETHICAL DIFFERENCE

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In 1 Corinthians 1:18 and 21, the apostle Paul writes about preaching: “For 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 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the *foolishness of our proclamation*, to save those who believe.” Later, in 1 Corinthians 4:9-10, Paul turns his attention to himself and his fellow apostles—that is, he turns his attention to preachers: “I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all,” he writes, “as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. We have become *fools for the sake of Christ*”

The foolishness of preaching. The foolishness of preachers. Over the past few years Paul’s words have haunted me. They have haunted me as I teach preaching in the midst of a world shaped by almost overwhelming powers of domination and violence and death. In the midst of all these powers, I am helping people prepare better sermons? It seems like foolishness. And the apostle’s words have haunted me when I stand up to preach with nothing but a word in the midst of a world shaped by armies and weapons of mass destruction, by global technology and economy, by principalities and powers that overwhelm both by their seductiveness and their threat. Up against all of that, I speak for a few minutes from the pulpit? It seems like foolishness.

And I wonder if this sense of the foolishness of preaching has contributed to the theme of this conference: “Does Preaching Make a Difference?” Maybe the subtext, the unspoken question is: “Are we all just fools to keep doing this?” Surely there are more effective ways to “make a difference” in the world.

Now, of course, this question, “Does preaching make a difference?” emerges from particular contexts. It is not universal. The question would probably seem absurd, for example, to many people in African-American traditions. Does preaching make a difference? Even to ask that question may make some African Americans feel their traditions have been ignored. How can one even pose such a question in light of the way preaching has sustained and empowered African-American communities for generations? How can one even entertain such a question within the traditions that produced Martin Luther King, Jr.? And preachers in some other cultural contexts may also find this question to be strange.¹

Does preaching make a difference? The question is contextual, not universal. On the one hand, the question reflects contexts of growing secularization, in which a once-influential church seems increasingly irrelevant—and along with it the church’s

¹I am indebted to John McClure, and, indirectly, Brad Braxton, for these reflections.

preaching. And that context is one many of us undoubtedly understand. It is a context that makes Paul's assertions about the foolishness of preaching seem quite contemporary.

On the other hand, as I have suggested, for many of us the question also grows out of a deep sense of the principalities and powers at work in our world. The question reflects an honest, even tragic, awareness of the enormity and intractability of those superhuman forces in the world that preaching must confront—those structures and institutions and systems and myths and ideologies that seem to drive the world, and often lead to death. This is the primary context within which Paul's words about the foolishness of preaching haunt me. This is the context within which I wrestle with the question, "Does preaching make a difference—or are we all simply fools to keep doing this?"

Several years ago, some students placed a cross at the center of the campus where I teach. Not a nice, small, shiny gold or silver cross. But a very large, rough, wooden cross. It was at the beginning of the Iraq war. And the students wanted to set up a place for vigils and prayers—and resistance. They had heard about an old cross that was somewhere on the campus. So they went looking for it. They finally found that cross in a storage room on the third floor of the main building. It was very old and worn. And the stand was in horrible shape, so the cross was always leaning to the side—cockeyed. But the students carried that old, cockeyed cross out to the center of the campus. They set up that cross as a challenge to the power of the U.S. military. They set it up as an alternative to the policy of "shock and awe."

That is the foolishness I have in mind. And that is the foolishness I think Paul is talking about. All of us preachers are fools, Paul proclaims. Madmen. Madwomen. For what we do is a form of madness: we proclaim this gospel in the face of the principalities and powers.

Paul's preaching was just as outlandish as the act of the students at my school. In the face of the Roman Empire, Paul proclaims the cross, the crucified Christ. Religiously, it was unimaginable that the Messiah—the Christ—would be crucified. Philosophically, it was unthinkable that the divine could hang on a cross. And politically, it was inconceivable that the Messiah would liberate Israel through crucifixion by the Empire. Messiah—cross. These were incommensurable realities. Neither the religious nor philosophical nor political imagination could entertain such an idea. It was foolishness. Indeed, according to some scholars, as I have already suggested, foolishness is actually too tame of a translation. It was rather "madness."²

But what seems like madness to the world, Paul proclaims as the wisdom and power of God. In the process Paul inverts the language of foolishness; it becomes something positive—a virtue—over against the principalities and powers. Paul declares the foolishness of preaching, which proclaims the cross and announces an odd, new world—a world shaped not by domination and violence, but by a God of self-giving solidarity and love. Paul announces a new creation that interrupts business as usual and can only appear foolish in the eyes of the old creation. And the term "fool" becomes a positive characteristic of Christians who live in this odd, new world. As Paul writes to the church in Corinth, "God chose what is foolish to shame the wise." (1:27). And, as I noted earlier, Paul speaks of himself as a "fool for the sake of Christ."

² See Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

Through this gospel foolishness, Paul interrupts and subverts the presuppositions, rationalities, and myths of the world that lead to death, whether that death be moral or spiritual or physical. This is the sense in which I understand gospel foolishness: it is that which subverts the deadly presuppositions, rationalities, and myths of the world, which often constitute the “air we breathe” and prevent us from even imagining any alternatives. “Foolishness” here captures the dislocating and disorienting nature of the gospel. Foolishness characterizes a gospel that challenges many of our common sense presuppositions—our “foundations,” we might say—in order to help us glimpse the odd new creation that is breaking into the world.

Paul’s understanding of the foolishness of the gospel and the foolishness of preaching brings with it an extraordinary challenge for us: In the midst of the “powers that be,” in the midst of the world’s deadly myths and rationalities, it is ethically essential for preachers to play the fool. Preaching will make an ethical difference only as we risk this gospel foolishness.

Jesus himself plays the fool time and time again. Indeed, he often takes on the role of a jester. Throughout history, the jester is a figure who fundamentally sees the world differently; he or she has a different perspective on the world. And through often comical antics, the jester seeks to startle and dislocate people—especially those in power—so they might be released from their common-sense presuppositions and see and live in the world in new and creative ways.³ As someone has written, the jester “...melt[s] the solidity of the world.”⁴ The jester melts away those elemental assumptions that are supposedly “written in stone.” That is, he or she subverts the myths, rationalities, and presuppositions that others take for granted, but that often are the ways of death and not life.

Jesus regularly engages in this kind of activity. He plays the jester when he rides into Jerusalem, making a foolish spectacle of himself on that donkey, all the while subverting the world’s notions of power and rule and Empire. In his parables Jesus also plays the jester; he tells stories that begin familiarly enough, but then have extravagant, odd, dislocating elements. Indirectly, and often humorously, the parables seek to disorient us, shake us up, and invite us to see and live in the world in new ways.

The Sermon on the Mount is replete with other examples.⁵ I will examine just one in some detail. Nowhere does Jesus play the jester more fully than in his extraordinary, often misinterpreted, words in Matthew 5:38-41.⁶

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not violently resist an evildoer. But if anyone

³Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 13, 27, 38.

⁴Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (1935; reprint, Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1966), 223.

⁵For a fuller discussion of the foolishness of the Sermon on the Mount, from which much of this section is taken, see Charles L. Campbell, “The Folly of the Sermon on the Mount,” and “Imagine,” in *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount: The World it Imagines*, ed. David Fleer and Dave Bland (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007), 59-68 and 126-31.

⁶ Although the emphasis on Jesus’ role as jester is my own, my interpretation of the text relies on the work of Walter Wink. See Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 98-111; also *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 175-84.

strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”

“You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’” Here Jesus tackles the “law of retaliation.” It is in Exodus. It is in Leviticus. It is in Deuteronomy. It is important. Interestingly, the law was actually meant to limit violence—to check the kind of uncontrolled vengeance that was common in the day. It limited retaliation to retaliation “in kind”: “No *more* than an eye for an eye. No *more* than a tooth for a tooth.” It was a piece of progressive legislation.

But the deep presupposition remains: the way to respond to the enemy—the way to respond to one who has harmed you—is through violent retaliation. Jesus here names what Walter Wink calls the “myth of redemptive violence.”⁷ According to this myth, which traces itself back to the Babylonian myths of creation, the way to bring order out of chaos is through violence; the way to deal with enemies is violently to defeat them.⁸ Violence becomes the ultimate solution to human conflicts. As Wink writes, “Ours is neither a perfect nor a perfectible world; it is a theater of perpetual conflict in which the prize goes to the strong. Peace through war, security through strength: these are the core convictions that arise from this ancient [myth].”⁹

This myth is still alive; it is in the very air we breathe. We see the myth at work in children’s comics and video games and movies. The myth drives the war on terrorism—both the acts of the terrorists and the various nations’ responses to them; it shapes the Iraq war and the unending conflict in the Middle East, as well as all the other wars around the globe. The myth leads to violence against “the other,” including the immigrant, who threatens us; it lies behind the practice of capital punishment; and it even at times shapes our personal relationships. As a result, the cycle of violence seems unending. Many of us can hardly even imagine alternatives.

Jesus names the myth of redemptive violence when he states, “You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’”

“*But* I say to you,” Jesus continues. And with this “but” (often the most important word in the Bible) Jesus begins to “melt the solidity of the world.” “But I say to you, do not violently resist an evildoer.” That is the appropriate translation: “Do not *violently* resist.” The image here, as many scholars have noted, is a military image. That is what Jesus rejects—violent resistance. Jesus certainly does not tell us not to resist evil. Jesus himself resisted evil all the time. But he did so without resorting to violence. And that is what he tells us here: “Do not *violently* resist an evildoer.”

Then Jesus invites us to imagine alternatives to violent resistance: “if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” Here Jesus puts on the cap and bells of the jester; he plays the fool.

⁷My discussion of the “myth of redemptive violence” is taken from the work of Walter Wink. See, for example, Walter Wink, *Powers that Be*, 42-62.

⁸In the Enuma Elish, the Babylonian creation myth, the god Marduk brings order out of chaos by killing his mother, Tiamat, and then fashioning the world from her dead corpse. See James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 60-72.

⁹Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 17.

Humor becomes the vehicle to set us free. As biblical scholars have noted, these are not calls to passivity, but to nonviolent resistance. Jesus challenges the powers of domination and violence through burlesque and lampooning.¹⁰ He imagines antics worthy of any jester as a means of speaking truth to power. The audience surely would have been chuckling—or even laughing out loud.

Consider just one of his examples—“going the second mile”—which has become my favorite. Here is the situation. A Roman soldier was permitted to force someone to carry his equipment for one mile—but *no further*. The practice had been abused, so a law was enacted to limit the demands a soldier could make: *one mile, no more*. So Jesus says, “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” Imagine the scene at the end of that first mile:

The soldier says, “Okay, that’s enough. We’ve gone one mile. Put down my stuff and return to your business.”

But the person carrying the equipment replies, “Oh, I’d be happy to carry the equipment a second mile.”

“What?” the soldier replies, “You can’t do that. It’s against the law.”

“But I’d really like to help you out. Please let me carry it another mile.”

“Hey, I could get in trouble for that—fined or flogged. What are you up to?”

“I just want to help out. Could I *please* carry the equipment another mile?”

A wrench is thrown into the Imperial Machine, and it grinds to a halt, even if just for a minute. And possibly a space is opened up for something new and surprising to happen. It is the jester’s way of “speaking truth to power.”

A similar kind of nonviolent resistance takes place in the other two examples (turning the other cheek, giving the cloak). In all three examples, Jesus, the jester, lampoons and burlesques various aspects of an oppressive social order. At the same time Jesus subverts the myth of redemptive violence by imagining alternatives to violent resistance. Jesus seeks to set us free from the presuppositions that are killing us, such as the necessity of violent retaliation. And he invites us to live in the world in new, imaginative, even foolish ways.

Here and elsewhere Jesus plays the fool, subverting the myths, presuppositions, and rationalities that so drive our world. He unmask the “powers that be” and offers the church an alternative vision and new practices. And in a world so dominated by the principalities and powers, our sermons and our teaching need to be equally foolish—both in content and in form. We too need to learn to play the jester as we speak truth to power.

But Jesus does not just “play the fool” at the level of content and form, as important as those are. In the Sermon on the Mount he not only subverts the powers at the level of meaning. At a deeper level Jesus also plays the fool and subverts the powers at the level of *practice*, which is critically important. For practice shapes meaning as significantly as meaning informs practice.

Jesus’ *act* of preaching the Sermon on the Mount is as ethically significant as the meaning of what he says. The content of the sermon and the practice of preaching are inseparable. Like the three examples he gives in Matthew 5:38-41, Jesus’ preaching itself subverts the myth of redemptive violence. In choosing to preach, Jesus refuses to take up the weapons shaped by that myth, whether it be the stone or the gun or the bomb.

¹⁰Ibid., 177-79.

Indeed, Jesus actually *does* in the sermon what he counsels others to do in his examples of nonviolent resistance: he provides an alternative to the way of redemptive violence. And that alternative is *the preaching of the Word*. Jesus actually embodies what he proclaims; his preaching itself enacts an ethical alternative to the weapons of the powers. The Word becomes the ethical *means* to the *end* of the new creation.

We too play the fool not simply through the message we proclaim, though that will sound foolish to many. At the deepest level, we play the fool through the very act of preaching itself. Indeed, the practice of preaching represents a fundamental ethical option in our world, one that many will call foolish. Preaching represents an ethical decision to rely on the Word, rather than on the stone or the gun or the bomb. And in the face of the powers that be, that seems at times like absolute foolishness.

For, as we all know, the Word is vulnerable and fragile. It relies on flawed human speech. Even the people of God have abused this Word. Even God's people have preached crusades and war. Even God's people have used this Word in violent ways to abuse and manipulate and exclude, which is in profound contradiction to the ethic implicit in the practice of preaching.

The divine Word is strangely fragile and vulnerable. It does not control or coerce the outcome. It refuses to make others into objects or commodities. It refuses to take away human freedom. So it can be rejected and even crucified.

Yet we dare to believe that the new creation will come through this fragile, vulnerable Word. We dare to assert that this Word is the ethical *means* to the *end* of God's Shalom. How will that ever happen—God's new creation through the Word, through words? How long will it take? How much trust and faithfulness, and even suffering, will it require? It seems impossible to get to the New Jerusalem, God's peaceable Reign, with nothing but the Word. In the midst of a world shaped by the myth of redemptive violence, you have to be foolish to bet your life on that Word.

But this is the way of Jesus.¹¹ Indeed, the letter to the Ephesians captures this way succinctly: Jesus came "preaching peace" (Ephesians 2:17). "Jesus came *preaching* peace." That sentence is not just a statement about the *message* Jesus proclaimed: the good news of God's Shalom. That statement also refers to the *means* Jesus chose to embody and further that peaceable reign. Jesus did not resort to coercion. He did not take up weapons of war, though some apparently hoped he would. He did not pursue the way of domination, though he was tempted with this option out in the wilderness. In short, he resisted the way of redemptive violence. As the theologian, Dorothee Soelle, has put it, in Jesus Christ God unilaterally disarmed.¹² From the temptation to the cross, the only weapon Jesus wielded was "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Ephesians 6:17).

Jesus came *preaching* peace. Other approaches would have been inconsistent with the Shalom of God that Jesus embodied and sought to further in the world. Those means would have been at odds with the end for which he was working—the beloved community. We simply cannot get to God's Shalom—a community of mutuality, justice, and peace—by means of violence and domination. We cannot "seek first the reign of God" through violent means. We cannot get to the "new state of peace" by becoming the

¹¹Much of the following section is taken from Charles L. Campbell, *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 68-88.

¹²Dorothee Soelle, *Of War and Love*, trans. Rita and Robert Kimber (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 54-55.

evil we oppose. As Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote, "Constructive ends can never give absolute moral justification to destructive means, because in the final analysis the end is preexistent in the means."¹³ With Jacques Ellul, we could go even further and say that in Jesus the means and the ends are one, for in Jesus the end is already present in the means because in him the very reign of God has already "come upon us."¹⁴

Jesus came *preaching*. We cannot overstate this fact. Moreover, Jesus' reliance on the Word is inseparable from the foolishness of the cross that Paul proclaims. Indeed, from an ethical perspective, Jesus is crucified for two reasons. First of all, he speaks; he refuses to remain silent in the face of the powers of domination, violence, and death. He unmasks them, names them for what they are—not the divine regents in the world, but the opponents of God's way of Shalom. And he envisions alternatives to their way. The image of the "sword of the Spirit" is no accident. By means of his truthful speech, Jesus seeks to set people free from the powers of death. But because of his daring speech, Jesus is a threat to the status quo, to business as usual, to the system maintained by the principalities and powers. Because he refuses to remain silent, the powers must get rid of him, even if it means killing him. Such is the power of speech, the power of the Word.

But second, Jesus is crucified because he relies on the Word. He explicitly and consistently refuses to respond to the powers on their own violent terms. Jesus rejects the military option; he refuses to combat violent domination with more violent domination, even if it costs him his life. The only weapon he will take up is this vulnerable and fragile Word. And he is crucified. Such is the risk of relying on the Word.

This reliance on the Word is not limited to Jesus. The Apostle Paul also understood preaching as an alternative to the myth of redemptive violence.¹⁵ Paul's transformation on the Damascus road can in fact be understood as a turn from the way of the stone to the way of Word.

On the road to Damascus, as the story is related in Acts, Saul is "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (9:1), having earlier approved of the stoning of Stephen (8:1). Paul seeks to destroy his enemies through violent means. Violence, for Paul, is redemptive; it is the way to deal with enemies; it is the way to bring order out of chaos. But then he encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus. And later he is ordained by Ananias, his former enemy, in an extraordinary act of reconciliation. From this point Paul's life is transformed.

No longer does he resort to violence or persecution to further his cause. No longer does he drag his enemies to jail or condemn them to death. Instead, he becomes, in the deepest sense, a "keeper of the Word," to borrow a phrase from that great prophet of peace, Daniel Berrigan.¹⁶ Paul becomes one whose ministry—whose very life—is shaped by the Word.

- Proclamation replaces persecution.
- Preaching replaces stoning.
- Voice replaces violence.

¹³Martin Luther King, Jr. "My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," in Walter Wink, ed. *Peace is the Way: Writings on Nonviolence from the Fellowship of Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 65-66.

¹⁴Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), 79.

¹⁵I am indebted to Kathryn Summers, one of my former students, for this insight.

¹⁶Berrigan spoke these words at the funeral of William Stringfellow.

- Word replaces war.

This may be the most extraordinary transformation in the story. The story begins with Paul breathing threats and murder. But the story ends with Paul preaching the Word through the breath of the Spirit. In Damascus, Paul realized that he could not follow the way of the crucified Christ by continuing to use the weapons of the world. He realized he could not be ordained by Ananias and continue to approach his enemies with stones. I suspect he realized that what he calls “the foolishness of our proclamation” includes not only the *message* of the cross, but also the *practice* of preaching itself. For the foolishness of preaching involves trusting in the Word, rather than in the stone or the gun or the bomb.

The practice of preaching calls us similarly to become “keepers of the Word.” Inherent in the practice of preaching is an ethic that rejects the weapons of the world and calls us to an alternative ethical option: the way of the Word.

Preaching is a significant act of moral obedience to the foolish way of Jesus. Like Jesus, the faithful preacher does not remain silent, but witnesses boldly, announcing the coming of God's reign in Jesus Christ, exposing the deadly, idolatrous ways of the powers, and envisioning an alternative world—the new creation. Indeed, like a jester, the preacher may at times seem assertive, even irritating; for Christian preaching is not a form of passivity, but an active engagement with the powers of death. As writer and television commentator, Dorothy Samuel, has noted, “the love demonstrated by St. Paul and Jesus and Gandhi and Martin Luther King was a tough, firm, outspoken honesty that demanded the best from people, a love more accurately described by the Quaker injunction, ‘speak truth to power,’ than by the passive acquiescence of ‘never make anyone unhappy.’”¹⁷ Indeed, apart from such active resistance to the powers of domination, preaching can simply become an unconscious means of preserving the status quo (something any white man from North America like me must constantly remember). As the peace activist A. J. Muste put it, “In a world built on violence one must be a revolutionary before one can be a pacifist; in such a world a non-revolutionary pacifist is a contradiction in terms, a monstrosity.”¹⁸ So, following the way of Jesus, preachers engage in daring, revolutionary speech.

As disciples of Jesus, however, faithful preachers not only reject passivity, but also refuse to coerce belief or resort to violent domination, even in the face of conflict, disbelief, and rejection. Faithful preachers embrace a strange kind of powerlessness, like the powerlessness of Jesus on the cross. We finally must rely on God to “make a difference,” not only through our individual sermons, but through the very practice of preaching itself. Like the Word made flesh, the preacher's words depend on God for their effectiveness. Nevertheless, precisely by embracing this powerlessness, this lack of control, preachers resist and challenge the way of domination, coercion, and violence.

Preaching, to put it another way, involves what the feminist ethicist Sharon Welch calls an ethic of risk, rather than an ethic of control.¹⁹ An ethic of control defines responsible ethical action as that which can control the future and produce “results.” To be responsible means that one can ensure that the aim of one's action will be carried out.

¹⁷Dorothy T. Samuel, “The Violence in Ourselves,” in Wink, *Peace is the Way*, 241.

¹⁸Muste, “Pacifism and Class War,” in Wink, *Peace is the Way*, 6

¹⁹Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

Such an ethic, Welch argues, inevitably leads to violence as a means that can insure "results."

An ethic of risk, however, does not define ethical action in terms of control. Rather, ethical actions are those which create the space and possibility for further resistance to the powers. An ethic of risk, Welch argues, "...begins with the recognition that we cannot guarantee decisive changes in the near future or even in our lifetime. The ethic of risk is propelled by the equally vital recognition that to stop resisting, even when success is unimaginable, is to die."²⁰ Faithfulness and risk, she suggests, are more important than effectiveness or success. And this is good news for all of us who know that preaching often does not seem to make a tangible or immediate difference. As preachers, we always live by risky hope.

Relinquishing this ethic of control lies at the heart of the foolishness of preaching—the foolishness of the cross. For only in its foolishness, only in its madness, only in its nonsensical otherness does the cross have real power. That's why eloquent wisdom, as Paul says in Corinthians, *robs* the cross of its power. Eloquent wisdom seeks to control and manage the cross; it seeks to make the gospel effective by our own efforts, rather than by trusting in the gospel's odd power. But only when the cross is out of our control and not managed by us can it really save us.

That is why madness is so threatening. We can never control it; it throws us off balance; it keeps us unsettled. And that is why the "word of the cross" may seem especially odd for many of us homiletics and preachers. For our great temptation is to make the cross sane and manageable. Our temptation is to plug it into a system or a theory of the atonement—and get control of it. Our temptation is to capture it in our rhetoric and try to make it effective through our own efforts.

But, according to Paul, that desire for control is the problem. Once the cross is neatly placed into our little system or our "eloquent wisdom," the cross becomes dependent on us. We are the ones in charge. The cross cannot save us because we are too busy trying to save it. Only in its foolishness, only in its madness, only in its nonsensical otherness does the cross have real power.

So when Paul writes about preaching in First Corinthians, he almost stammers about foolishness that is wisdom and weakness that is power, and even foolishness that is power (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). He is never able to disentangle all of these odd pairings. Paul's own rhetoric is subverted and transformed by the foolishness of the gospel. It is powerful rhetoric, to be sure. I am not dismissing rhetoric. But it is rhetoric with no other foundations, no more encompassing theoretical frameworks than the story of Jesus itself, and particularly the madness of the cross. As a result, Paul's rhetoric becomes, in the words of New Testament scholar, Alexandra Brown, an unconventional, destabilizing rhetoric.²¹ For, as homiletics Andre Resner has reminded us, the disruptive gospel controls Paul's rhetoric, rather than conventional rhetorical or philosophical wisdom controlling and framing the gospel.²²

The foolishness of the gospel, that is, transforms even our speech. Even our rhetoric is shaped by an ethic of risk, rather than an ethic of control. Maybe this is why

²⁰Welch, *Ethic of Risk*, 20.

²¹Alexandra R. Brown, *The Cross and Human Transformation: Paul's Apocalyptic Word in 1 Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 30.

²²Andre Resner, Jr., *Preacher and Cross: Person and Message in Theology and Rhetoric* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999).

the preaching of those on the margins is often so rhetorically powerful. The ethic of risk is a given for them. They have no illusions of control, and they have no stake in the dominant paradigms or “foundations.” So they often rely on the story of Jesus and the power of the gospel in all of its destabilizing radicalness—and their rhetoric is shaped accordingly. Maybe an ethic of risk sets us free from a rhetoric of control.

So, we are left with the foolishness of our proclamation, both as meaning and as practice. We are left to become fools for the sake of Christ—keepers of the Word in the midst of a violent world. We are left to trust God’s foolishness, which is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness, which is stronger than human strength. And I believe that embracing this foolishness is the only way our preaching will really make an ethical difference. For the world today desperately needs a people who will rely on the Word, rather than on the stone or the gun or the bomb.

I considered closing with the example of Martin Luther King, Jr. He was certainly a “keeper of the Word,” and his preaching certainly made a difference—though it also got him killed. The title of Richard Lischer’s extraordinary book succinctly captures this aspect of King’s work: *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word that Moved America*.²³ I thought about closing there.

But instead, I want to close with a different example. This past October I visited South Korea, and I encountered an image of preaching that I shared with members of the Academy of Homiletics at our meeting in Minneapolis. While in Korea, I had the opportunity to go to the Reunification Observatory, which sits on a hill on the border between South and North Korea. When you get to the top of the hill you look out over border into North Korea. You can see the demilitarized zone, the fences, the barbed wire. And of course, all around the military presence is palpable—training camps, uniforms, machine guns. It is a sobering experience.

But there is more than the military in that place. Off to one side of the observatory, there are two large statues. One is a statue of Buddha, which faces North Korea with his arms open in blessing. Standing right beside Buddha is a statue of Mary, also facing north, her hands folded in prayer.

And on the other side, a little further up the hill, is a chapel—for military personnel. When I walked up to see it, I discovered it was open. So I went inside. And I will not soon forget what I saw.

The chapel is round. You enter through the back of the sanctuary, facing the chancel area. And when you enter, you notice only one thing. The entire front of the chapel is a large, clear glass window. Through the window you see the hills of North Korea—and the DMZ, the fences, the barbed wire. It is as if that is the point of the chapel. The people who worship there have to look through that window the whole time. As they pray and sing and praise and confess, they have to look toward North Korea with Buddha and Mary; they have to look through that window toward their enemies, who are also their brothers and sisters.

Right in front of that window stands a small pulpit. And every worship day the preacher stands there between North and South—amidst the barbed wire and the fences and the guns—with nothing but the Word. And he preaches as the congregation looks toward their enemies, who are also their brothers and sisters. And he keeps on preaching,

²³Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word that Moved America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

week in and week out, though little seems to change. A keeper of the Word. A fool for the sake of Christ.

Does his preaching make a difference? I believe so. Because God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.