

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Epiphany 4 (A) ~ 1 February 2026
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Psalm 15
Matthew 5:1-12

If Following Jesus is Foolish...

From time to time here at St. Dunstan's, as in Christian congregations around the world, we sing music from the Taizé tradition. Taizé chants are easy to recognize, because they are hauntingly beautiful and are meant to be repeated, over and over, in community. It is our custom here in *this* congregation to incorporate Taizé music regularly during our Lenten worship – particularly gathered around the cross by candlelight on Good Friday.

*O Lord, hear my prayer,
O Lord, hear my prayer;
when I call answer me.
O Lord, hear my prayer,
O Lord, hear my prayer;
come and listen to me.*

*Bless the Lord my soul and bless God's holy name.
Bless the Lord, my soul, who leads me into life.*

*Ubi caritas et amor,
ubi caritas, Deus ibi est.
(Where charity and love are found, God is there.)*

Sometimes the piano drops out, and we carry on *a cappella*, our individual voices blending both in unison and glorious harmony.

It is truly beautiful. Stay tuned in the coming weeks.

Taizé music is the product of an intentional monastic Christian community in Taizé, France, in Burgundy. Perhaps you know about it. Every year something like 100,000 young people from around the world travel to Taizé on pilgrimage for a time of prayer, fellowship, and service.

Taizé was begun in 1940 by Brother Roger Schütz, a Swiss Christian leader, and his sister Genevieve, who purchased an old house with the specific intent of hiding Jewish refugees. Eventually the Gestapo caught on to what they were up to, and Roger and Genevieve had to abandon their heroic ministry.¹ In 1944, Brother Roger returned to Burgundy to found the Taizé Community, shaped by a common obedience to the Gospel of Jesus. Over time, Taizé became an international, ecumenical witness of Catholics, Protestants, and Anglicans dedicated to “the Christian call to bring peace and reconciliation to a violent and divided world.”²

Today, more than 80 years later, Taizé continues to shine light in the darkness.

Over several decades of faithful leadership, Brother Roger became known for his prayers and other writings about forgiveness and healing. In a little book he wrote with Mother Teresa entitled *Seeking the Heart of God: Reflections on Prayer*, Brother Roger said this:

Jesus the Christ calls us to love even those who hurt us, and to pray for them...When we entrust to God those who have clashed with us, something may indeed change within them, but our own heart is already on a road of peace. When you are hurt and humiliated, will you go on forgiving till your very last ounce of strength? That is what loving to the end means. Can there be no miracles on earth? Love which forgives is a miracle.³

On August 16, 2005, while going about his business, doing what he did – praying with the community gathered for peace and healing at Taizé – Brother Roger lost his life violently, at the hands of a deeply troubled woman who emerged from among the crowd of worshippers. Brother Roger was 90 years old.

¹ <https://kellylatimoreicons.com/blogs/news/brother-roger-of-taize>

² <https://www.stjames-cathedral.org/Events/2005/frereroget.aspx>

³ Mother Teresa and Brother Roger, *Seeking the Heart of God: Reflections on Prayer* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993).

Some might say that his earthly life ended in defeat.

Will you go on forgiving till your very last ounce of strength?

Love which forgives is a miracle.

As I prayed about the Scripture readings assigned for this week, I felt strongly compelled to share Brother Roger's story as a more contemporary illustration of what St. Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth nearly two thousand years ago:

The message about the cross is foolishness...

In this "unsteady and confusing world,"⁴ to borrow a phrase from our *Book of Common Prayer*, the voice of violence, and hatred, and retribution screams senselessly all around us. It is so difficult – if not impossible, particularly now – to tune out. Anger and vitriol do their best to eat away at the fabric of society, at the core of community...and, it must be said, at the very heart of the human soul.

Fight fire with fire!

Give as good as you get!

Hold onto that grudge with all your might – and be willing to do anything to protect and preserve it.

Is *this* "the wisdom of the world"?

By contrast, St. Paul says that, as Christians, we are to live an altogether different way:

The way of Jesus.

⁴ "For Young Persons," *BCP*, 829.

The way of the cross.

The way of love.

In the ears of those who wield secular power, words such as “prayer,” and “forgiveness,” and “healing,” and “reconciliation” sound weak. That was as true in 1940, when Brother Roger and Genevieve purchased that old house in Burgundy as a refuge for persecuted Jews, as it is today. They were willing to risk everything for the sake of the suffering.

How absurd. How foolish!

Yes, the message about the cross, the Gospel of Jesus, which gives shape and meaning to our own discipleship here in 2026, *does* seem foolish by worldly standards. The same Jesus Who taught His followers to “turn the other cheek” and preached mercy, peace, and righteousness surely got His, didn’t He?

The mighty Empire silenced that rabble-rousing trouble-maker once and for all, didn’t it?

Well, by some measures, yes. It certainly did. Violence and retribution had the last word.

Except they didn’t.

The message of the cross is that, in the words of St. Paul,

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.

God took an instrument of humiliation and torture, a tool of execution, and with it turned the world upside-down.

What was most decidedly a defeat in earthly terms – agonizing death – revealed the ultimate power of God. And, as St. Paul writes elsewhere,

neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38-39).

Nothing.

The message of the cross, then, is that God answers a resounding “NO!” to the very worst that humans can possibly do to each other – in first-century Jerusalem, in 1940 France, and, I would argue, in the United States in 2026.

What appears to be loss, or weakness, or even foolishness is, in fact, the victory, strength, and eternal wisdom of God.

From the dawn of creation, the ways of humanity have been at odds with the way of God. That seems to be the way we are hard-wired: to be defiant and obstinate and to listen to our own voice, even at our peril.

I think we probably can agree on that – or at least admit the possibility. The evidence is pretty clear.

But (and): Because God loves us enough to give us the gift of free will, we are left to *choose* whether we want to follow the ways of humanity or the way of God. It really is up to us.

There’s an old song, from the 1970s, that goes

If loving you is wrong, I don't wanna be right.

How’s that for poetry? 😊

Well, to paraphrase,

If following Jesus is foolish, I don't wanna be wise.

You've heard me say before that being the Church, being followers of Jesus in a secular world, is meant to be counter-cultural.

If it isn't, then we are doing something wrong, my friends.

We are called to be foolish.

What does that look like in your context? How are you being invited – this very day – to live counter-culturally?

Some might say that simply choosing to be part of a Church community in the 21st-century is ridiculous in the eyes of the world. Professing faith in, and allegiance to, a crucified God makes no sense.

Neither, some might say, does it make sense to come out to worship on a frigid cold day (thank you, by the way!), when you could be at brunch, or at home doing the *Times* crossword puzzle in your jammies.

And neither, some might say, it is at all logical to give up your time, talent, or treasure to contribute to the work of the Gospel in the world.

Foolish – all of it. And counter-cultural.

But I will say that, as for me, if following Jesus is foolish, then I really do not want to be wise.

Sadly, I wish I had the courage to be more foolish more of the time. I'm working on it; I look to you all to keep me honest.

We need to do that for each other – help one another be fools for Christ.

You may have seen, or at least heard about, the Opinion piece that ran in *The New York Times* on Friday. It is David Brooks' last stand, his "farewell address," after 22 years as a columnist for the paper, entitled "Time to Say Goodbye." It seems that

everyone I've talked to over the past two days has been buzzing about it; even our beloved Bishop referenced it in her remarks at Diocesan Convention yesterday.

As you might imagine, Brooks has a lot to say as he transitions out of his iconic role, and I commend the column to you. What struck me most was his choice to end by quoting the 20th-century theologian, philosopher, and ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote:

*Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.*⁵

Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history.

If following Jesus is foolish, then please God, let us not be wise. Together.

Amen.

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/30/opinion/david-brooks-leaving-columnist.html>