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Saint John's Episcopal Church  
Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

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Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Today's sermon is taken from the Epistle 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, chapter 1, verses 18-31.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen*

When the American baseball player Bill Gullickson signed a phenomenal contract to play baseball in Japan, he was asked what daily life was like in Japan. He replied that the language was the most difficult and different feature. "It's crazy," he said. "The only American words I saw were Sony and Mitsubishi."

Well, I guess you could call them American words, but there's a lot of foolishness in the world, and that foolishness includes you and me. That's right. St. Paul, in this morning's epistle just read by John, calls us foolish. He writes in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, chapter 1, "Brothers and sisters: think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential, not many were of noble birth; but God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong, and he chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things and things that are not to nullify the things are, so that no one might boast before Him." Paul here is talking about us. We are the foolish things that he is referring to. He's talking about people who make up the church. I want to read it again:

"Brothers and sisters: think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential, not many were of noble birth; but God chose the foolish things of the world." Paul is saying, "Look, God hasn't chosen celebrities or athletes or rocket scientists to proclaim God's work. He has chosen people like us -- farmers and fishermen and tax collectors and housewives. Today we might say God's chosen are electricians and technology experts and plumbers and sales people and teachers. That's who God depends on. God uses every-day people to do God's work.

We are a culture that worships celebrities and athletes, but it is not celebrities and athletes that God is depending on to change the world; or rocket scientists or the rich and the powerful. God, I think, depends on Sunday school teachers and ushers and

greeters and people singing in the choir and people filling out pledge cards -- good people, not superstars, but solid, responsible church people. That is who God is depending on in this world.

God uses common, every-day people to do his work, and that is what Paul is saying when he writes, "Brothers and sisters: think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential, not many were of noble birth; but God chose the foolish things of the world."

Now, to tell you the truth, I wouldn't have done it that way if I had been God. I wouldn't have started at the bottom of society and worked my way up. I wouldn't have had my son born to Mary and Joseph in a stable at Bethlehem. I would have had him born in Caesar's household. Then one day he could stroll out on his balcony and wave his hand and say, "From now on everyone will be Christians."

But that was not how God did it. God started at the bottom of society with very ordinary people, and that is still how God is working today -- through ordinary people like you and me. We are God's plan for saving the world. God is counting on us. Who us? Yes, us. God is counting on us to turn the world upside down. You can see why Paul says it sounds like foolishness to the world. God chose the church to do God's work in the world. This is the primary reason that Jesus came into the world. If you ask most Christians why Jesus came into the world, they'll say, "He came to die for our sins." And that's true, of course, but there's another reason Jesus came into the world. It was to train an ordinary group of people to take the message to the world. Who was that group of people? Why us, the church, the body of Christ. The key reason Jesus came into the world was to found the church. We are to be his body doing his saving work in the world that is lost.

Jesus started with only twelve men and an unknown number of women. By the time he died the company was still very small. Then after Pentecost that number exploded. By the time Paul was preaching to the Corinthians, there were tiny churches planted in towns all along the Mediterranean. Still it seemed like a mighty stretch when St. Paul said that God was going to use this motley group of generally powerless people to turn the world upside down.

Of course it was not long, relatively, before that tiny group of believers took over the whole Roman Empire. But at the time Paul was preaching it probably did not sound like so much foolishness that God was going to do anything significant in the church. Do you know that there are still people today who think it is foolishness that God is going to do anything significant with the church? And the sad thing is that some of these people are in the church. Some people still don't understand that the

church is center of God's plan in this world.

Now, I know that silly things happen in the church; I've seen them in thirty-one years of ministry. Sometimes tragic things happen in churches. Some of the most un-Christian people in the world are found on church roles -- bigots and snobs and uncaring people, people who are an embarrassment to God. I'm very aware of that. But I also know this, and you know it too: The best people in this town of Sandwich are in the church. I run into them all the time. They are people who care about their families, they care about their neighbors, they care about their communities; and the reason they care is that, once upon a time, they stood at the baptismal font and were baptized Christians and became followers of Jesus.

There is really only one way to make this community a better community, one way to make this town a better town, one way to make this a better world -- and that is to bring everyone you meet to know Jesus. There is nothing else in this world that will work. That is how God has chosen to turn this world upside down. The work of the church is serious work and important work and life-changing work. It's work that God is calling you and me to do.

Now, this means something quite obvious. If the church is the means that God has chosen to turn this world upside down, each of us has an important part to play. If this is God's plan not to work through celebrities and athletes and rocket scientists, but through ordinary folks like you and me, it means that there is something for each of us to do.

I have a friend, Tom Ely, who is now the Episcopal Bishop in Vermont. Tom was ordained with me in 1980. After our ordination Tom served two small parishes in central Connecticut. Each Sunday he went to two services. The larger church which had their service at 10:00 a.m. had an average attendance of seventy people. The smaller church located in Killingworth, which had the 11:00 hour for their service, had an average attendance of four. Now, Father Ely resented preaching to four people, particularly at the 11:00 o'clock service. He had already preached his sermon once; he had it down pat, and now he was preaching it to four people, basically two elderly couples. It was depressing as a newly ordained person. He felt it would make much more sense if the four people at that service would hop in his car and go with him down to the other church. Four people.

There was another elderly couple who came sporadically, so sometimes in the church there were six. And there was an old gentleman who came on Christmas and Easter, so on those Sundays they had seven, but he rarely came at any other time. One Sunday, however, this old gentleman named Claude showed up on a regular

Sunday, and at the conclusion of the service Father Ely could see that something in the service had touched Claude quite dramatically. He went back to him and asked, "Claude, are you having some kind of problem? I don't usually see you here on Sunday." Claude squinted his eyes and looked up at Father Ely. "Father," he said, "things aren't going to be like this around here anymore." "I didn't know if he meant he was going to burn down the church or what," Father Ely said to me. "I didn't know any other way that the church could be changed." But the next Sunday morning when Father Ely drove up to that little church, there were cars parked everywhere. He went inside and there were children and teenagers and older people, and on the little board where they posted the attendance for Sunday school it said fifty-eight -- fifty-eight! Now that's not a big crowd in most churches, thought the young clergyman Father Ely, but when you've been averaging four, it's all the people in the world.

He looked for Claude. "Where did all these people come from?" Tom asked. "Well, Father Ely," Claude said, "I know these hollows up in here better than you do. I went to old folks and shut-ins I knew who weren't going to church and said, 'If I come and get you Sunday in my station wagon, will you come to our church Sunday morning?' And every once in a while someone would say, 'Why Claude, you don't have to come for me; my daughter could bring me down there,' and I would go to a family that had young children and say, 'If my son or I came to pick up your children Sunday morning, would you let them come to our church?' And every once in a while someone would say, 'Why, you don't have to come after my children, I could bring them!'" And this is what happened. Fifty-eight people!

Well, Father Ely knew it wouldn't last. It didn't. The next Sunday they were down to fifty-six; the following Sunday though, they had sixty. And for a decade after that, that small church that had once averaged four on Sunday, averaged about fifty people, most of whom would never have been in church, except that a seventy-five-year-old man named Claude was determined that his church wasn't going to be like that anymore; and that's all that it takes. Why? Because God chose to do something foolish. God chose ordinary people like you and me, and God set out to changing the world one person -- one person -- at a time. Was God foolish to count on us? Only you and I and God know the real answer.

*Amen*

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs