

# Foolish Love



The Love that Transcends All Understanding

## Study Guide



First United Methodist Church  
*Downtown Bentonville*



## Foolish Love - Study Guide

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At the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus is to commit to two things: loving God and loving our neighbors. These days, however, those seem incredibly difficult. You might say it is foolish to even try. That is truly the kind of love Jesus invites us to share, however. It is a foolish love of those who don't understand us, don't agree with us, and might even betray or deny us.

Over the next few weeks, we will look at some aspects of what defines such foolish love. We will start on Ash Wednesday by asking what love is. Then we will look at these characteristics of foolish love: forgiveness, rule-breaking, unfairness, waste, ridiculous generosity, and risk. All of that will lead us to the ultimate foolishness, loving and following a savior who died a criminal's death out of love for all of us.

I hope at the completion of this journey we will all have a better understanding of what it means to love. As a pastor, the last few years have consistently involved helping people navigate deep divides in their families and friendships. It seems this world is bent on driving us apart, something those of us in United Methodism know all too well these days. Well, we will take a prophetic stand in opposition to that division. Let's use this Lent to practice the discipline of love. The world needs it now more than ever. And so do we. May this Lenten journey be one that challenges you, but may it also be one that blesses you. And through it all, may you feel the love I have for you in these pages I wrote. But more than that, may you know yourself loved by Jesus Christ.

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**Ash Wednesday Half Week:  
What is Love?**

## **What Is Love?**

**Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a**

How do we define love?

For something that is so central to human existence, you would think we would have a clear concept of what love is. If I asked 100 people for a definition, though, likely I would get 100 different answers. Perhaps that is because it is so central to human existence, and it is both universal and unique to every human.

Often love is expected to take place in certain types of relationships: marriage, parenthood, family. Love in such roles is still unpredictable, however. Some of us know the power of unconditional love in our lives, and some of us know love that came with strings attached. All of us have been children, but that does not mean we have all experienced the same expression of love from parents. Some of us are close with our siblings, and some are deeply estranged. Some have found and created new spaces of love among friends, and some find love for all people, no matter how hard.

Over the course of this Lenten journey, we are going to look at love – appropriate for a season that starts on an Ash Wednesday Valentine’s Day. And we will look at love in terms of relationships: primarily the relationship between us and God. We will see our own typical conceptions of love get turned over and challenged from time to time. In fact, the kind of love God calls us to is going to seem foolish at times. The kind of love God expresses and then invites us to offer to God and to others breaks so many of the rules that we set up for ourselves. It demands forgiveness in unforgivable situations, creating imbalance in our equations and seeming offensively unfair. It is wasteful in its

abundance, and stupidly generous in its expression. And it comes with tremendous risk, risk that has us asking where the boundaries of love should be. But ultimately it is a love that gives us hope and life and freedom in all its foolishness, because ultimately it draws us to God.

As we delve into this journey, however, it is probably a good idea to put a few frames up to help us better understand love, both the love God calls us to and the conceptions of love that are part of our understanding. Let's look at our general definitions of love, as well as how love was understood in Hebrew and Greek, before we turn to a key definition of love in the Bible.

When you look at the definition of love in a typical English dictionary, the first thing of note is that "love" is both a noun and a verb. As a noun, definitions talk about strong affection or kinship with someone, a warm attachment, or someone who is an object of that attachment. There is also a distinction in the expression of love, some definitions noting sexual expression, and some talking about unselfish or benevolent acts for the good of humanity, implying that personally knowing the recipient of the action is not necessary.

As a verb, love is equated to sex or sexual activity. It also means to hold dear, or to like or desire actively. One definition also included "to thrive in," such as "Michelle loves school" (which is true – I do).

It is also true that we use the word love in moments of profound emotion and connection, as well as to express casual appreciation, like "I love those chocolate chip cookies!" Yes, cookies are a favorite of mine, but if they disappeared altogether, I am not going to grieve their loss like I would a beloved family member. Love has many expressions, and those are definitely shaped by colloquial expressions in our culture. So

understanding love, and especially trying to translate love from one time and place to another, can be tricky. Let's look at how love was understood in biblical Hebrew and in Koine Greek (the Greek of the New Testament) to help us understand how love is used in the Bible.

Just as it is difficult to define love in English, it is difficult to narrow the words used for love in Hebrew. For our purposes here, we will look at two Hebrew words: *lev* and *khesed*.

*Lev* is the Hebrew word for heart. In English, we conceive of the heart as both the organ that pumps our blood and keeps us alive and the metaphorical location for love. In Hebrew, heart is so much more! Yes, it is the location of love and all kinds of emotions, but it is also the location of character, identity, belief, ethics and thought. The heart represents the center of a human – the source of all that is distinctive about that person. When God says that God wants our heart, it is truly that God wants our whole selves, not just our love.

*Khesed* is a characteristic often associated with God. It is the word that can be translated as “steadfast love.” It can also be translated as loyalty, kindness, devotion, and faithfulness. What *khesed* captures is the tenacity of love. It is not about infatuation, but faithfulness. *Khesed* is a willingness to stick together through all things. It is an unending covenant that holds across time and space and situation.

You have probably heard that there are three kinds of love in Greek. There are actually four: *agape*, *philia*, *eros*, and *storge*. *Storge* is familial love, and includes love among family members and friends that are considered part of the family. For an English equivalent, kinship is probably the best example. You may



recognize *eros* since it is the root of the word “erotic.” *Eros* is most closely associated with sexual or physical expressions of love. Neither of these words or forms of these words appear in the New Testament, though certainly the sentiments they express do (*storge* love especially).

*Philia* does appear, however, twenty-four times in the New Testament, in all four Gospels, 1 Corinthians, Titus, and Revelation. Perhaps its most interesting appearance takes place in John 21, when Jesus and Peter are at the lakeshore after the Resurrection. You may recall that Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. We lose something in the English, though, because both *agape* (God-like love) and *philia* (love of friends) are at play. Here is the conversation with the Greek word in parentheses:

When they finished eating, Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love (*agapas*) me more than these?”

Simon replied, “Yes, Lord, you know I love (*philo*) you.”

Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” Jesus asked a second time, “Simon son of John, do you love (*agapas*) me?”

Simon replied, “Yes, Lord, you know I love (*philo*) you.”

Jesus said to him, “Take care of my sheep.” He asked a third time, “Simon son of John, do you love (*phileis*) me?”

Peter was sad that Jesus asked him a third time, “Do you love (*phileis*) me?” He replied, “Lord, you know everything; you know I love (*philo*) you.”

Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.

You see that the first two times Jesus uses a form of *agape* when addressing Peter, but Peter always responds with a form of *philia*. In the end, Jesus then meets Peter where he is and frames the love in terms of *philia*. Some scholars think that the words are simply interchangeable and find little use in splitting hairs over the two kinds of love.

I disagree. The two kinds of love ARE different, and a native Greek speaker would know that. *Philia* is sometimes called brotherly love (think of Philadelphia – the City of Brotherly Love), but perhaps love among friends is the best way to put it. *Agape* is usually described as God-Like love. It is a love that transcends situations. It is a love that holds across time and space. It is an insistent love that does not die, does not abandon, and does not require the other person to love in return.

So in that passage, Jesus is trying to push Peter to aim for *agape* love, but Peter will only respond with *philia*. Perhaps it is due to his shame for denying Jesus the night Jesus was arrested. That is what is so beautiful about this moment. First, Jesus is giving Peter a chance to heal the three times denial with a three times confession of love. And then, as Jesus invites Peter to a transcendent love that isn't subject to denial or betrayal, but Peter just cannot bring himself to make that claim. So, Jesus goes to him where he is, and accepts his promise of friendship instead.

That is the foolishness of God's love. God invites us to love the way God loves – steadfastly, transcendently - and has every confidence that we can! And then God always accepts us when we don't quite hit that mark. But God will keep believing in our capacity to love, and will keep calling us in that direction. Over the next few

weeks, we will see some of the ways we are invited into love, and especially invited into *agape* love.

For this Lenten season, I will suggest a discipline of love for us all to work on. It comes from an exercise someone once gave me using the passage suggested here for Ash Wednesday, 1 Corinthians 13. Michelle Amos also references it in the video. There are many potential definitions of love in the Bible (the Greatest Commandment, perfect love casting out all fear, write these words on your heart, etc.), but perhaps the most concrete is this passage that is used so often in weddings. The exercise invites you to read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a. Everywhere the word “love” appears (or “it” if referring to love), you substitute in your name. Then, as you read it with your name in place of love, take note of where it feels like you are lying. For instance, for me I can read, “Michelle Morris<sup>1</sup> is patient, Michelle M. is kind, Michelle M. isn’t jealous, Michelle M. doesn’t brag, Michelle M. isn’t arrogant – oh, there it is.” I am not arrogant all the time, but when someone questions my knowledge or particularly my academic pedigree, it is ON! So I need to spend some time this Lent working on my arrogance. Anywhere you bristle is a sign that you need to work on that aspect of love within yourself. And if you bristle for the entire passage, maybe the first thing you need to do is learn to love and respect yourself so that you can see something beautiful in you!

And let me also affirm the exercise that Michelle Amos suggests in the video – while you are working on how you need to love, also use this passage as an affirmation. Lift up that you do love well in many ways! Those places where you struggle are just part of your

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<sup>1</sup> I use my last name and initial here to clarify I am not quoting Michelle Amos from the video.

journey for now. You are invited into loving the way Christ loves, and Christ is confident that you can. And if you are still struggling, imagine someone around you filling this in for you. My guess is that Michelle would have confidently affirmed all of those aspects of love for her Papa. You are probably far better at love than you may give yourself credit for.

These definitions of love that we have explored will always be incomplete. That is because love is in all things and is all things, because God is love. Our words fail us when we try to fully express love, just as our words fail us when we try to fully understand God. Still, we can take in moments, and we can love the way God loves from time to time. Hopefully this Lenten journey will open us up to even more ways to live that love.

1. How do you define love?
2. Who in your life has loved most like Jesus?  
What was it about them that would inspire you to choose them?
3. If you were in Peter's place at the end of John, how would you answer Jesus' questions? And how would you respond to Jesus' challenge?
4. See the end of this book for the 1 Corinthians 13 passage with blanks for you to insert your name. What discipline of love will you commit to strengthen during Lent?



**Week One:**  
**Foolish Love Forgives**

## Foolish Love Forgives

Scripture: Matthew 5:21-4, 18:21-35

When I dug into both Hebrew and Greek looking for the two words that would be translated as “forgive,” I was surprised to discover it was not two words, but many. Words that are translated as “forgive” could also mean loosen up, relax the tension, lift up, take away, take up, let go, permit, leave, send off, or abandon. Let’s focus on three of these: loosen up, lift up, and let go.

**Loosen up.** I have a quiz that I give to couples when they are getting married. The last question in the quiz is, “Who will load the dishwasher?” It seems like an absurd question, but I find that marriages break apart as often over what might be considered mundane things as they do significant betrayals. Part of that is due to whether someone feels appreciated or not for the work they do in a marriage. But honestly, often it is because the work that one person is doing is not “right” according to the other person. Some of the worst fights in a marriage come down to someone loading the dishwasher “incorrectly.”

I used to condescendingly think that was absurd. Then I had a friend come to live with us. She was a friend I often turned to for her wisdom and insight into various things, big and small. I had been grateful to her for recommending that our family start buying organic milk, for instance. She noticed that we didn’t drink a lot of milk, and so we usually were pouring quite a bit of it down the drain once it reached its expiration date a couple weeks after I bought it. She pointed out that, while organic milk was a little more expensive, it had a 5-6 week later expiration date. Not only did we spend

far less, we also usually got almost to the end of the milk carton before it expired.

When she came to live with us, she also had helpful suggestions for how to load the dishwasher. And how to clean the baseboards (which I didn't even know was a thing). And how to vacuum the floors. And how to raise my child! And soon enough the recommendations were not just suggestions, but things she insisted on. Guess what happened to the tension in the house? Guess what happened to our friendship? Actually, we were able to save the friendship – she moved out.

There was a whole lot of loosening up that was needed in that situation, from both of us, and we were sometimes good at that, but toward the end, success at relaxing the tension became more and more elusive.

Forgiveness is about letting go of some of our expectations and control. But it is also about knowing how to cut the tension. Sometimes the best way to do that is to spend time talking through why something matters so much to someone. Sometimes the best thing to do is put space between you – a proverbial cutting of the rope - relaxing the tension that way. But it does mean loving the person enough to seek the solution.

**Lift up.** Loving the person enough to seek the solution. Here we are again, back to love! Love in spaces that need forgiveness can be stomach churning. There is probably a festering wound there. There may also be great distance between you and the person you need to forgive.

When I have someone I need to forgive, inevitably someone will suggest that I pray for them. Honestly, that is often the last thing I want to do. But usually I will eventually dutifully undertake that task. My prayers do not start out charitable. Sometimes they go something

like this: “Dear Jesus, please help that person quit being such an idiot! Amen!”

As time goes on, however, my prayers for that person intersect with prayers I have for other people. Maybe it is the combination of prayers, maybe it is the Holy Spirit working on my heart, maybe a little of both, but the result is that my prayers for that person change. Often my change of heart comes as I minister to others who remind me of the person I struggle with. I will be praying for someone with cancer, and I will remember that the person who needs forgiveness had a resurgence of cancer a few months ago. I will be praying for someone who has lost their uncle, and I will remember the person I am praying for lost their husband a couple years ago. Now I am starting to wonder if some of these things might be impacting how that person treats people. Now I am starting to remember times I have behaved selfishly when I am facing my own crises. Now not only are my prayers changing, my understanding of that person is changing as well.

Even in situations when the person’s actions are inexcusable, there is something about lifting the person up in prayer that changes the pain of the situation. It doesn’t always eliminate the pain, but it does transform it. You know, the words Jesus gave to us to pray to God – the words known widely as the Lord’s Prayer – are not very many, but they contain words that ask for us to be forgiven and assume that we have forgiven others. The importance of that prayer is illustrated in the story this week about the man who refused to forgive debts, even after his own have been forgiven. Jesus knows such forgiveness doesn’t come easy, but gives us a prayer to make forgiveness a regular part of our faith. God knows



that prayer can help change our grudges into forgiveness.

**Let go.** Why do you suppose forgiveness is so important to God? Not only is it the center of the one prayer Jesus gives us to pray, but it is also at the heart of the sacrificial system at the center of Temple worship from the beginning. From the very beginning of Temple worship, reparation offerings were required to heal brokenness in the community. Obviously it is something God sees as definitive of our relationship with God and others.

The answer may come in Matthew 5:21-23. Jesus is taking on the “Do not murder” commandment, and expanding it to say that anyone who is angry with your brother or sister is in danger of judgment. Jesus even warns against calling someone an idiot (uh oh – I really have to watch my prayers, don’t I?!). How are murder and anger equivalents though?

First, anger kills a relationship. When it is among family, that has a particular vulnerability to it, especially in the ancient world. To cut off from family was effectively to end a name, an identity, and without those things (in the ancient world especially), you might as well be dead.

Second, anger takes your own life from you. I have watched people twist themselves up into balls of hate. Their anger and their grudge becomes their whole purpose. They become people with no joy, no light, and no life to them. They are solely defined by their hate.

Anger is a death sentence, but not for the person you are angry at. Rarely is that person remotely as affected as you are – unless your anger has truly twisted you into a person who spends your time torturing them. No, anger kills you. Recall the quote attributed to The

Buddha: “Holding on to anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.”

God has given us forgiveness as a gift. It is the gift of letting go. It is a gift of being free from anger, hate, and hurt. And the best thing is, you do not even always have to let the other person know you have forgiven them!

Both of the passages for this week imply – or even state – that you must find the person and heal the relationship face-to-face. Sometimes that is a necessary part of forgiveness. However, sometimes it is just that we are invited to let go of the anger. After all, if you come to the altar and you are not angry with your brother or sister, you do not need to go find them and make things right before you bring your sacrifice forward.

There are situations where face-to-face reconciliations bring about tremendous healing all around. Then, there are situations where face-to-face invites more need for forgiveness. This is especially true in abusive situations. Jesus may call us to forgive a multitude of times, but Jesus does not call us to continue to participate in unhealthy or dangerous situations (we will address this more when we look at the riskiness of foolish love).

What we are called to do is forgive. Forgiveness does not actually have to involve the other person at all. It is an internal, spiritual state. It is working on our own heart, or allowing the Holy Spirit to work on our heart, so that we can let go of all that pain we are carrying around. And we should let go. After all, it is killing us. Loosen up. Lift up. Let go. No wonder there is no one word for forgiveness. It takes all these things to truly experience the wonderful, freeing, abundant life that God wants for us. But it is also not beyond our reach.

We need only lean on Jesus, and then take that first step.

1. The Lord's Prayer asks God to forgive us as we forgive others. Sometimes we quit paying attention to words we speak ritually like that prayer. What do those words mean to you now as you stop and consider them?
2. In the video, Pastor Ray Wheeler suggests that true forgiveness is not real unless you are forgiving something unforgivable. What do you think about that challenge? Have you ever forgiven something unforgivable? If so, what did it take to get there?
3. How is forgiveness a gift from God?
4. Who do you most need to forgive right now?



**Week Two:**  
**Foolish Love Breaks the Rules**

**Foolish Love Breaks the Rules**  
**Scripture: Mark 7:24-29, Luke 13:10-17**

What lengths would you go to in order to save someone you love?

Our world is full of stories of people who broke the rules to do something that would help someone they loved. Just sitting here, a few movies instantly come to mind: *Romeo and Juliet*; *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*; *Philadelphia*; *Patch Adams*; *Mulan*.

And some real-life stories come to mind, like Loving v. Virginia, which fought to take down interracial marriage laws. Or the family of Ryan White, who fought for the rights and care for people diagnosed with AIDS. Or John and Revé Walsh, who have worked tirelessly to change laws and founded the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children after their son Adam disappeared.

And then there are the biblical stories. Our Bible is filled with stories of rule-breakers. People break the rules for both good and bad reasons. Perhaps the best rule-breaker of them all was Jesus. He regularly ignored the rules – rules that in some cases were interpretations of what God meant, but also rules that came straight out of Torah code – in order to set people free of the things that were keeping them bound up.

We have two such stories for this week, though in one of them Jesus has to be reminded to break the rules. A woman whose daughter is sick comes to Jesus and asks for healing. Jesus does not immediately grant that healing to her. Why not? Because he is tired? That may be contributing to Jesus' response, but it is not the reason he gives the woman for denying her. He tells her that he cannot take food meant for the children and throw it to the dogs. Why is Jesus calling this woman

and her child dogs? They are Gentiles. At this moment, Jesus sees his mission as one to the Jewish people only. That is the rule he is following.

This woman has a sick child. She is not going to let something like ethnic identity get in the way. So she challenges Jesus, calling him to at the very least share the crumbs that fall from the table. This woman not only sees beyond ethnic lines, she also has confidence in the abundance of God's power – the slightest bit will do the work she needs done.

This rule-breaking woman reminds Jesus of his true mission: to set everyone free, to help everyone know the fullness of life in God's reign. She also reminds Jesus of the abundance of God, something we will explore more in the weeks to come. Her audacity on behalf of her child calls Jesus to break the arbitrary boundaries between people to help the most vulnerable.

This woman's story parallels the story Liz Emis shares with us in this week's video. Liz's tenacity for her son reminds us how foolish love does not see limits when it comes to our children. It should also remind us we should not see limits when it comes to the world's children. We are called to listen to those children, and to listen to those parents who know something is not quite right. No matter what boundary – geographic or otherwise – lies between us, if we are called to love like Christ, we are called to love beyond limits and fight for the lives and the voices of those children.

The second story we have for this week shows us Jesus the rule-breaker at work himself. We could have chosen any number of Jesus' stories for this week, from flipping out and flipping tables to healing the man at Bethsaida to eating grain on the Sabbath. Jesus was constantly drawing the ire of those around him who

were committed to the rules above all else – even above preserving the people the rules were ultimately made to protect.

I chose, however, a lesser-known story of the bent over woman. This passage does appear in the Revised Common Lectionary (a collection of passages that many pastors in many denominations use to decide what to preach), but the same week it is offered, the call of Jeremiah is also offered, which may be a more appealing passage to many than this one. Plus, this story is in a particularly difficult chapter of Luke. The verses that precede it contain mysteries of history (the fallen tower of Siloam) and an odd fig tree parable, and the verses that follow contain short parables about the reign of God before launching into prophetic damnation for Jerusalem. In other words, this is a chapter many avoid in favor of other stories that illustrate similar points more clearly.

But this woman's story, which only appears in Luke, is important because not only does this woman suffer from a painful condition, that very condition makes her full inclusion in community extremely difficult. Yes, there is the restriction that practically anyone who is sick or injured suffers at the time (a wrong assumption that any such condition is automatically proof of sin). Additionally, her bent over condition creates difficulty interacting with anyone to simply be a contributing presence in society.

Toms Shoes used to sponsor a yearly "One Day Without Shoes" to encourage people to understand the impact not having shoes has on your mobility and inclusion in things. One year that I partook, I ended up having to go without shoes (due to a packed schedule) from 5:30 a.m. to 3 a.m. the next morning. There were

several lessons that I learned, including that people in the wealthiest part of Dallas pay for very soft grass and probably never walk barefoot on it. But the thing that stood out the most was how little interaction I could have with others. I was looking constantly at my feet instead of seeing the people who later told me they waved at me, or even smiling at people who walked by. The lack of interaction combined with the pain in my feet really started to drag on my psyche.

This woman has no choice but to primarily look down. If she was so bent over as to be described in those terms, looking up to see people's eyes would have been difficult and painful. She is not just cut off because of assumptions people may be making about her because she is ill, she is cut off physically by the realities of her condition. Jesus restores her to health and community – and he draws attack for doing so.

When they attack him, he calls them hypocrites and reminds them of her humanity. To deny her the chance to be healed, no matter what the day, is to treat her less than they would an animal. Jesus reminds us that the rules may have a purpose, but if that purpose becomes the point – rather than the purpose of freeing people from bondage and affliction – then the point is lost.

So yes, love calls us to be rulebreakers. We break the rules when people need to be included. And we break the rules when someone gets the chance to live the fullness of life. Rules, especially God's rules, are meant to protect and preserve life and community. They are not meant to protect and preserve power. If we are to foolishly love, we need to remember that. And we need to be ready to stand tall for those who cannot, and to



fight for all God's children like a mother protecting her own.

1. Someone in history has probably broken rules that have now benefited you. Who is that person, and what rules did they break?
2. Have you ever stood up and broken the rules (or considered doing so) for the benefit of someone else? What was the outcome if you did?
3. Who is restricted from the fullness of community among us now? What would it take to include them? How could we all benefit by their inclusion?



**Week Three:**  
**Foolish Love is Unfair**

## **Foolish Love is Unfair**

**Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16, 18:12-13**

“That’s not fair!”

I cannot remotely guess how many times I said that to my parents. I can tell you when I did say it, I was most likely objecting to the way they were treating my brother in comparison to the way they treated me. Even as I sit here unable to count the times I said that to them, I can tell you what their response always was to me.

“We aren’t trying to be fair. We will never treat you fairly because you are different people. You don’t want us to treat you fairly. You want us to treat you like you.”

I didn’t understand that reasoning at the time, but now I am so grateful that is how they approached parenting. And I am definitely thankful that is how they loved us both.

I am also grateful they taught us that lesson in the boundaries of a loving home, because it prepared me for life in a world that isn’t fair. We are not islands unto ourselves. We are part of society, and we are created to love and be in relationship with others. This means that we also have to contend with the choices that others make, and sometimes that means the repercussions of their decisions also impact us.

In this week’s video, Kristin Wells shares how she and her husband Wesley were impacted by the decision of a man they hit with their car when he stepped in front of their car as they were traveling on an interstate. They experienced profound worry for the man, losing sleep as they wondered if he lived. They rejoiced to learn that he did. They also, however, faced their own struggles due to that man’s choice. They had to rearrange

schedules while they were limited to one car, make claims on insurance, and navigate the panic that Wesley experienced for some time when he thought about having to drive again. These were struggles they willingly undertook, always keeping the man's health and welfare at the heart of their concerns. But was it fair that they had to go through all of that? No it was not.

There is a difference between unfair and unjust. Unfairness is a result of recognizing the value of difference in people, and then making space for each individual and each situation. Unjust is capitalizing on difference in order to privilege some over others for somewhat arbitrary reasons. God will always treat us unfairly, just as my parents did my brother and me. At the same time, God will always seek justice and expect us to work diligently to counter injustice in our world.

The trick is, sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between what is unjust and what is unfair. So let's look at the passages for this week to see if we can get some guidance on the difference.

Both of these passages tend to upset longtime church people. Why? Because they both imply that someone can confess a belief in God on their deathbed and still get into heaven. But come on, folks! Let's take a step back for just a minute and get some perspective. Because these passages can be way more offensive than that!

Why do I say that? Well, to answer that, first let's look at why Jesus teaches in parables. The answers are found in Matthew 13. In Matthew 13:13, Jesus tells the disciples he teaches in parables so the people will not understand what is being said. Then, in Matthew 13:35, we are told Jesus speaks in parables in order to reveal

what has been hidden since the beginning of the world. In other words, he uses parables so people will finally understand!

Wait, what?

Parables both reveal and hide the meaning Jesus is sharing with others. Maybe that is because some people will always understand the symbolic nature of parables, while for others the clarity will come in taking the parables literally. It is likely that Jesus means for both realities to have meaning. So, parables certainly are revealing something of the reign of God to come, AND they are likely showing us how to reorder our concrete reality here to better resemble that reign.

Both of these parables call for caring for the most vulnerable among us. But they are also calling us to share in the most unselfish ways. As hard as it may be for us to share heaven with latecomers, we struggle even more with sharing in the here and now.

A couple of current realities give some space to reflect on this challenge: tipping and the housing market.

Recently I watched a couple of news stories on tipping culture in the US (one from the Wall Street Journal and one from CNBC). They were responding to some studies that revealed the growing number of people who are irritated by screens that include pre-figured tips. These studies say that as high as two-thirds of Americans are frustrated by tipping. I will admit, when I face a tip request when I am picking up a to-go order, I have a moment where I stop and wonder what I am supposed to do.

Most people know that tipped workers have a different minimum wage than other workers. You may not know, however, how low it is. In 1991, the federal

minimum wage for tipped workers was set at \$2.13, and it remains there to this day, almost 35 years later. Some states have a higher tipped minimum wage, and by law if tips do not equal the federal standard minimum wage of \$7.25 an employer is supposed to make up the difference. But just take a moment there and think about what it is like to get a check that reflects \$2.13 an hour. My guess is that at times that won't even cover taxes on earnings.

Now let's turn to the housing market. Owning property has become a battleground among generations, with Millennials (those born roughly between 1980 and 1997) arguing that Baby Boomers (those born from 1945-64) had unfair advantages such as a booming economy, relatively small competition for resources from older generations, and favorable interest rates that have made home ownership (even multiple home ownership) much more accessible for them than Millennials. Another video by TikTok creator Freddie Smith pointed out that even within generations there are some marked advantages, based on what year you entered the economic playing field. It breaks the middle class down into five groups:

1. Bought a home before 2020 with an interest rate under 4% with no kids: monthly outlay (for housing and daycare) = \$1500
2. Bought a home before 2020 with an interest rate under 4% but has kids in daycare: monthly outlay = \$4000
3. Bought a home in 2020 or later with an interest rate around 7% with no kids: monthly outlay = \$4000
4. Renting instead of owning with kids in daycare: \$5000

5. Bought a home in 2020 or later with an interest rate around 7% with kids in daycare: monthly outlay = \$6500

That last category of people would require a household income of \$100k a year just to cover housing and daycare. Again, some of those statistics are going to vary from state to state, but even when they are lower, it is likely that the state's wages are also lower and that has the same effect of difficulty in affording housing and daycare.

If Jesus were telling these parables today, he very likely could use a restaurant server as the lost sheep and a young family for the workers in the vineyard who arrived late. Then being protective of who got into heaven in the end feels far less urgent than who can afford to feed their kids right now.

These parables made people in the ancient world not only face their spiritual selfishness, but also injustice in the society around them. Jesus not only called them to make God more inclusive, he invited them to think about how they can make social systems that don't depend on exploitation of some for the benefit of others.

The truth is we still grumble at having to share what we have. I stand there and question whether I should tip for carryout when the person in front of me still has to take time to wait on me and still may be making less than \$3 an hour to do so! Because the question in my head is, "Do they deserve this?" People with a roof over their head and money in the bank still look at young people and say, "If you work hard enough and quit complaining, you will be fine," without recognizing that

the situation they face is not the same one we faced 30 or 50 years ago.

Life is not always going to be fair. And God will definitely not be fair! Thank God! Because if we all got what we “deserved,” my guess is a lot of us would be hungry and standing. God is not aiming for fair. God is looking at each situation and adjusting accordingly. And the truth is, we want God to treat us like us. And we want God to love like God loves.

However, we should also remember that God is working for justice and calling us to work for that justice too. Justice does mean giving up something of what we have so that someone else can benefit. When we face the difficulty of that reality, I invite all of us to remember that we serve a God of abundance, not of scarcity. If we trust in God’s provision, there will always be enough. But I am getting ahead of myself – that is the lesson in the week ahead.

1. Have you ever faced a time in your life when you were given more grace than you “deserved”? What impact did (or would) such a gift have on your life?
2. Which is more challenging, thinking of heaven as open and available to anyone no matter how late they come to faith, or exploring the concrete realities of these parables and seeking to change our systems here and now?
3. If Jesus were preaching these parables today, what are some other situations you think he could use to illustrate unfairness?
4. In the video, Kristin Wells shares the difficult story of when she and her husband struck a man who stepped in front of them on the



highway. They were primarily concerned for the man and his safety, but she also honestly reflected on the consequences she and her husband faced because of that man's decision to step in front of them. Have you ever faced consequences in your life for someone else's decision? What were the results? Have you ever made a decision yourself that deeply impacted others? What happened to your relationships with one another?



**Week Four:**  
**Foolish Love is Wasteful**

## **Foolish Love is Wasteful**

**Scripture: Mark 5:1-17; John 2:1-11**

Our church has recently kicked off an environmental care team. I am excited and also a little overwhelmed at the work of this team. They are taking a close look at so many things in our church, from how effectively we recycle in our building, to whether we can switch to coffee mugs and glass communion cups for the fellowship hour and communion, to the possible installation of solar panels and electric charging stations.

They take their work seriously because they also take the charge that God gave us in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible seriously: to care for creation. They also believe the stakes are high. We need to do a significantly better job in this work, or our children and grandchildren will pay a heavy, perhaps catastrophic, price.

We do need to pay attention to how much of God's world we waste. But is waste ever a good thing? Let's look at the waste that takes place in the passages for this week and include the passages that are in the accompanying devotional, just to see how much waste there is as God seeks to move us to the fullness of God's reign.

**We are legion.** This has always been one of my favorite stories in the Bible, in large part due to the wildness of it. There is a man so possessed, he literally breaks chains. When Jesus encounters him and all his demons, the demons recognize who Jesus is and beg to be spared by being cast into pigs. Jesus obliges the demons, who then promptly run the pigs off a cliff and die. That is an absolutely wild story! However, my affection for this passage only grew when I considered

the point of view of the pig herders. Can you imagine what they went through? It was bad enough they had to herd next to this possessed man, but now they lost all their pigs due to him! What a tremendous waste of a good herd!

**Wedding at Cana.** Why serve the good wine first, and keep the mediocre wine for later in the celebration (which probably took days, by the way)? Because, days into the celebration, people would be too drunk to notice that the wine had fallen in quality. Here, however, Jesus helps this family give their guests the best wine ever – toward the end of the celebration! Half the guests wouldn't even know how to appreciate it by then, and yet they are treated nonetheless.

**Fig Tree.** This isn't the fig tree in Matthew and Mark, that Jesus curses for not bearing fruit. This is the fig tree of Luke, the tree that gets another chance even though it hasn't borne fruit for years. A tree that hasn't been producing might be of more use cut down and made into furniture, yet here it is, getting more time and more fertilizer, and more chances to show what its got.

**Parable of the Soils.** And speaking of wasteful farmers, here this one is just throwing seed out willy nilly. Some of these seeds will fall on rock and never have a chance to grow. Some will be eaten by birds and may or may not grow, but probably nowhere near the farmer's field. Some will get choked out by weeds. Out of all the wasted seeds, only a few take root for harvest. What a waste!

**Feeding the 5000.** This story starts out with too little and ends with too much. There are as many baskets of leftovers as started out being passed around, and everyone has had their fill. I suppose if more people had

showed up and the baskets continued to be passed around, there would still be that much leftover.

**Lost Coin.** A woman loses a coin, worth about a day's wage. She doesn't spend the day working to earn its replacement. She spends the whole day looking. Happily, she finds it! And then... she throws a party for the neighborhood that would have likely cost more than a day's wage! This story is defined by absurd waste.

**For God so loved the world, and He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.** These passages, John 3:16 and Philippians 2:1-11, both speak of God in Christ willing to set aside the privilege and power of God to be fully present with humanity, even to experience death, which is certainly something God could avoid. Being human is arguably an unnecessary waste of God's power.

All of these passages involve waste, some on tremendous scale. But what is the waste for? Setting a man free of possession and restoring him to sanity and community. Rescuing a young couple from shame at not being able to provide proper hospitality. Extending mercy when it isn't "deserved." Opening God's love and discipleship to places and people the world doesn't value. Feeding thousands of people. Showing abundant and ridiculous love and grace. And loving us – all of us – so much as to live in our muck and mud, to know our life and our death, and to offer us the ultimate gift of love: eternal salvation.

Over and over I see people behave as if we are worshipping a God of scarcity. No. We worship a God of abundance. We worship a God of generosity. And we worship a God of tremendous waste – excess grace and love that covers us all, and then some! Thanks be to God for all the waste we are grateful for!

1. When is waste a bad thing, and when is it good?
2. Which of the stories discussed for this week is the most wasteful to you? What would it mean for you to imagine Jesus “wasting” that much love on you?
3. Rev. Sara Bainbridge mentions in the video for this week that these works of Jesus look foolish on God’s part. Why isn’t God out there changing the whole world instead of focusing on these small individual moments? What difference does focusing on individuals make when it comes to experiencing God’s powerful love?



**Week Five:**  
**Foolish Love is Prodigal**

**Foolish Love is Prodigal**  
**Scripture: Luke 15:11-32; Matthew 5:38-42**

I had heard the story of the two sons referred to as the Prodigal Son story from the very first moment that someone shared it with me. Even as a perpetual church visitor (I did not join the church until age 25), I went often enough to be exposed to this story. I took for granted I knew what prodigal meant. It had to be someone who was irresponsible and careless and greedy.

In seminary, though, I was taught to at least sometimes question those monikers given to stories. After all, the titles often put on stories – The Prodigal Son, The Rich Young Ruler, The Raising of Lazarus – were titles that Bible editors added to stories. They were not in the original manuscripts. So, the first time I was preaching on this story, I decided I ought to at least look up this word I thought I knew. And then imagine my surprise...

Prodigal – 1. spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant; 2. having or giving something on a lavish scale.

Wait, what? Ok, maybe I could see the reckless spending. But having or GIVING something on a lavish scale implies unbound generosity. Generosity on a scale that is difficult to measure.

I suddenly wanted to reconsider this story from two directions. First, I took a hard look at how the so-called prodigal son is described in the story. We actually do not have a reliable account about how the son spent the money. We are told in the narration that “he wasted his wealth though extravagant living.” The word translated as “extravagant” there in Greek is *asotos*,



which can be translated as riotous, extravagant, or prodigal. So there is a recklessness implied there, but we do not know if it was a selfish or generous recklessness.

We do have one other detail about how the younger son spent his money, but it comes from accusations leveled by a very angry older son. He accuses his brother of spending all his money on prostitutes. But how does he know? As far as we can tell, there has been zero interaction between the two brothers since the younger one left. The older brother is likely either repeating rumors or just saying something to be as hurtful of his brother as he can be.

Isn't that a human reaction? When we are hurt because someone has left and seemingly betrayed us, we want to characterize them in the worst light ever! We also are so often not even interested in hearing their story. And we certainly are not of a mind to just wipe the slate clean and take them as they are before us.

I am reminded of a story my dad would often tell. In fact, it was one of my favorite stories that he told, and I would request it, much to the chagrin of my mother and brother, who did not feel the same way about it as I did. Perhaps you will agree with them in a few moments, but nonetheless, I am going to share it with you anyway. Still, to spare you some of the agony, I will tell the abridged edition.

There was a little boy whose dad came to him on his fifth birthday. His dad said, "Son, you are getting ready to start school. This is a big moment for you. I want to celebrate this important step in your life by getting you a wonderful gift. Anything you want, you tell me, and I will get it for you."

“Well, Dad, I’ll tell you, what I really want more than anything else is a green ping pong ball.”

“A green ping pong ball?” exclaimed his dad, “Why in the world do you want a green ping pong ball?”

“Well, Dad, I really can’t tell you. I would just really like to have a green ping pong ball.”

“Well, you can’t have one!”

The boy was turning sixteen. His dad came to him, wanting to do something to mark this important event. His dad said, “Son, you are getting ready to start driving. This is a big moment for you. I want to celebrate this important step in your life by getting you a wonderful gift. Anything you want, you tell me, and I will get it for you.”

“Well, Dad, I’ll tell you, what I really want more than anything else is a green ping pong ball.”

“A green ping pong ball?” exclaimed his dad, “Why in the world do you want a green ping pong ball?”

“Well, Dad, I really can’t tell you. I would just really like to have a green ping pong ball.”

“Well, you can’t have one!”

This went on and on, every important event in the man’s life - his high school and college graduations, his marriage, the birth of his children. Same exchange. Then the day came when his father was dying. His father called his son to his bedside, wanting to clear the air of anything between them. His dad said, “Son, I am dying. I want to make sure I have been a good father to you, that you have all you could ever want or need. Anything you want, you tell me, and I will get it for you.”

“Well, Dad, I’ll tell you, what I really want more than anything else is a green ping pong ball.”

“A green ping pong ball?” exclaimed his dad, “Why in the world do you want a green ping pong ball?”

“Well, Dad, I really can’t tell you. I would just really like to have a green ping pong ball.”

“Well, you can’t have one!” And then his father died.

The man had a son of his own. When the man was turning 75 years old, his son came to him, wanting to honor his father for all he had done for him. His son said, “I want to thank you for being the father you have been to me. Anything you want, you tell me, and I will get it for you.”

“Well, son, I’ll tell you, what I really want more than anything else is a green ping pong ball.”

“A green ping pong ball?” exclaimed his son, “Why in the world do you want a green ping pong ball?”

“Well, son, I really can’t tell you. I would just really like to have a green ping pong ball.”

“Well, you can’t have one!”

The time came for the man to face his own last days. As he lay on his deathbed, his son came to him. He said, “Dad, you have always made sure I had whatever I need. I want to make sure you leave this life without any regrets. Anything you want, you tell me, and I will get it for you.”

“Well, son, I’ll tell you, what I really want more than anything else is a green ping pong ball.”

“A green ping pong ball?” exclaimed his son, “Why in the world do you want a green ping pong ball?”

“Well, son, I’ll tell you. The reason I want a green ping pong ball is...”

And he died.

I will give you a moment for whatever you need – groans, curses, or even time to reflect.

I have reflected often on that story. It has taken me to many places. Today it has me thinking about the conditions we put on giving generously to the people we claim to love. Sometimes they ask for huge things, like the son in the parable asked of his father. But sometimes they ask for tiny things. All too often we put conditions on either case. There are times when limits are a good thing, such as when you are refusing to enable destructive conditions fed by addiction, for example. But there are times that we impose limits out of our own desires for control, or demands of certain results, or our own desires to be honored and respected.

And it is at this point that I stopped and considered the story from the Father's point-of-view. This story should not be called the Prodigal Son story. This story is the Prodigal Father story! How reckless is the love, generosity and grace of the father in this story, not just for the younger son, but for the elder one as well! The father gives ridiculous generosity to them both. To the younger he gives his half of the estate, the fatted calf, and the joyful welcome home. To the elder he gives all of the rest of his estate, and personally meets that son where he is in his anger and intentionally invites him to the party anyway.

That is the kind of father that God is for all of us. Ridiculously, prodigally generous. And then God challenges us through Jesus' teaching to extend a similar generosity to others. That is the generosity that, as the Matthew passage for this week says, pushes against the kind of retaliatory justice that the elder son and we so often seek, and instead invites us to turn the other cheek, hand over shirt and cape, and literally walk an extra mile for someone.

There is another ending to the Green Ping Pong Ball story. I graduated from college in the midst of a very hard time for my family. My father was in the midst of fighting a grueling civil rights lawsuit after being unjustly fired for hiring two minority employees. He was unable to find work in the midst of those conditions, and we were all scratching by, collectively pooling resources to keep the family afloat. I did not expect anything for graduation under the circumstances. Yet, my mom and dad each showed up with a gift for me. My mom gave me a coffee cup in the shape of a globe with the countries of the world on it, with a note that that she would give me the world. And my dad gave me a box with only one thing in it – a green ping pong ball – with a note that simply said, “No questions asked.”

That is the foolish, prodigal love God has for us. And that is the love God calls us to share. A love of no questions asked.

1. Is there something you always wanted that didn't make sense to want? What would it mean (or did it mean) for someone to give that to you?
2. What are some things that can be given “No questions asked,” and when do we need to set limits? How do we know which is which?
3. In this week's video, Rev. Dr. Don Hall reminds us to “Remember, God loves you and there's nothing you can do about it.” Have you experienced that kind of love?



**Week Six:**  
**Foolish Love is Risky**

## Foolish Love is Risky

Scripture: Matthew 5:43-48; 26:14-25, 47-50

I asked Google for quotes about risk, and it pointed me to an article on the page for Ellevate, an organization that purports to give people (especially women) a career kickstart.<sup>2</sup> I have no affiliation with that organization, nor any idea if it is effective or not, neither do I know if the quotes it attributes to the following people are accurate. But here were some that caught my attention:

“If you don’t risk anything, you risk even more.” –

Erica Jong

“Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputations, can never effect a reform.” –

Susan B. Anthony

“Making a bold move is the only way to advance toward the grandest vision the universe has for you.” –

Oprah Winfrey

“... in order for the turtle to move, it has to stick its neck out. There are going to be times in your life when you’re going to have to stick your neck out. There will be challenges and instead of hiding in a shell, you have to go out and meet them.” – Dr. Ruth Westheimer

As we enter Holy Week, let’s ask, “How would our lives be different if Jesus had been too afraid to take a risk?” We know Jesus had the benefit of being God and knowing ultimately this week would lead to an empty tomb. But Jesus was also walking around in a human body, a body that felt pain, hunger, and fear just as we do. None of those sensations are ones we can shrugged

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ellevatenetwork.com/articles/7564-quotes-about-taking-risks>

off as if they are nothing. All of them will drive people at times to acts of rage or violence.

So let's sit for just a moment with those quotes and the unfolding of Holy Week and consider what would have happened if Jesus was not willing to risk it all for us.

If Jesus was truly concerned about his reputation, he wouldn't have considered coming in on a donkey. On the other side of town, a Roman official was coming in on a horse, with chariots and guards around him. Jesus would have at the very least matched that energy if reputation was his concern.

If Jesus was unwilling to make a bold move, he most certainly would not have flipped the tables in the Temple, which drew the murderous ire of the authorities. He probably just would have been ripped off by the cheating merchants, made his offering, and gone on his way.

If Jesus hadn't stuck his neck out as he faced questioning by Caiaphas and Pilate by speaking to the truth of whom he was, he might have just been whipped and sent on his way. Or, he may never have faced questioning to begin with.

If Jesus hadn't been willing to take the cup and drink from it, to face betrayal and denial, to risk everything for us, then none of us would know the revelation of the empty tomb and the salvation that God seeks for us all. Jesus seemed to risk everything so we could have everything.

Now the question becomes, "How much do we risk for others to know the love and salvation of Christ?"

This is an important question to ask. Often people will equate discipleship with taking up our cross and following Jesus. What does that mean?



Many times what people mean when they say those words is that the only proof that you are a true disciple is that you suffer profoundly. Suffering becomes the litmus test of how great a disciple you are. The worse your life is, the more holy you are, and the more committed you are to truly following Christ.

No. No, no, no, no, and no!

Here is the profound problem with that theology. It makes the cross the point of our faith. The reason that the cross represents Christianity, my friends, is because it is easy to draw – far easier than trying to draw an empty tomb. But the Gospels don't culminate in the cross; they culminate in the resurrection! The point of our faith is overcoming all the evil and suffering of our world to bring people to fuller life! Suffering is what must be overcome! It is not the point, but the obstacle!

But now that raises the question, "Is suffering a necessary obstacle?" That's a more complicated question to answer.

Raquel A. St. Clair wrote *Call and Consequences: A Womanist Reading of Mark* to address exactly that question. What she faced was the challenge of her community of African American women in which so many of them were wearing the suffering they were undergoing as a badge of honor. In her community, suffering and oppression were proof for some that they were living like Christ. She watched women stay in horrific, abusive relationships and justify their state by saying that taking such abuse kept them closer to Christ. This theology, by the way, is not exclusive to black women. Many people in abusive relationships find themselves caught in that theology, and abusers also capitalize on this theology to keep the abused in these

situations. This is a moment where theology *really* matters.

So St. Clair asks about the necessity of suffering in discipleship. As she surveys a great number of theologians and sociologists and others, she comes to these three helpful definitions:

**Agony:** “the disturbance of our inner tranquility caused by physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual forces that we grasp as jeopardizing our lives, our very existence.”<sup>3</sup>

**Suffering:** “unmetabolized, unscrutinized **agony**.”<sup>4</sup>

**Pain:** “named and recognized **agony** that comes as a result of life-affirming behavior.”<sup>5</sup>

In St. Clair’s reflection, **agony** is the umbrella that contains both **suffering** and **pain**. **Agony** is the disruption of shalom, the disturbance of peace that signals for us that sin is present in the situation and we are not yet in the fullness of the reign of God. Whether that condition gives rise to **suffering** or **pain** is the heart of the matter, though.

All three of these are present in the Holy Week journey of Christ, and especially so on the cross. If humanity’s dysfunction and tendency toward destruction were ever fully on display in one week, that would be it. Jesus’ tranquility is disrupted; we know that from the prayer in Gethsemane, as well as his prophetic weeping for Jerusalem. We also see that his life is in jeopardy. This was Jesus’ full **agony**.

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<sup>3</sup> Raquel A. St. Clair, *Call and Consequences: A Womanist Reading of Mark*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 36. These terms are printed in bold print to help us remember they refer to these definitions.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 69.

And yes, there is **suffering**. There is suffering in watching the ones he loves – all the ones he loves (Jewish authorities, Pilate, the crowd, and the disciples) – choose paths of violence, fear, ridicule, and hate. But in the midst of this **suffering**, there is also **pain**. There is **pain** because Jesus sees beyond these destructive moments to the salvation that will come to all of these sinners through the resurrection. Jesus is willing to accept the **pain** to achieve the definitive moment of life-affirmation in the empty tomb.

So if we return to the question of whether **suffering** is necessary in discipleship, we can confidently say, “No!” It is not necessary, though it may be present nonetheless. However, we should not seek out **suffering** as proof of our kinship with Christ. **Suffering** is what Christ sought to defeat.

Seeking to end **agony** so that we perpetually live in the fullness of God’s reign may mean subjecting ourselves to **pain**, but that is with the goal of more people experiencing the fullness of life. So, when Martin Luther King, Jr. undertook his mission for greater equality, he knew there would be **pain** in that mission. **Agony** was likewise at work, threatening and even ending his life. But it was all for the greater good, and for the diminishment of **agony** for so many. That is the kind of discipleship some of us are called to.

But none of us are called to remain in states of **suffering** as a part of our discipleship. So St. Clair can affirm that the women she knows in abusive relationships are **suffering** toward no good purpose. Jesus came precisely to set them free from that **suffering**. Jesus also came to set their abusers free from participating in such **suffering**. But that is the work of Christ, not the work of women who are caught in

agonizing situations. They can, however, participate in the **pain** of ending those relationships with the hopes that life-affirming realities come to be. Hopefully they do not undertake that **pain** alone, though, and they have a world of support around them – in shelters, law enforcement, therapy, education – to achieve an end to their **suffering**.

In the video for this week, Johnna Kosnoff references *ubuntu*, the African/Zulu concept that a person is a person through other people. It calls us to remember that we can never be whole without others, and when our neighbors do not thrive, none of us thrive. God has created us to be interconnected, to love not only God but to love our neighbors. Neighbors may be our enemies. Neighbors may be in precarious, dangerous situations. We are still called to take risks on their behalf. We are called to the **pain** of reconciliation and restoration, so that their **suffering** ends and the world's **agony** is diminished.

Discipleship is risky, especially when we are doing the necessary work of eliminating **agony** from the world. All of us should be willing from time to time to experience the **pain** of that journey. None of us should be willing to suffer, however, simply for the purpose of **suffering**. That doesn't bring us closer to Christ. Doing the hard work of breaking the back of sin does though. That's the risk we take as followers of Christ: the risk to love enough to be uncomfortable, to be challenged, to set aside our positions of power and ease, and seek the end of **suffering** in the world. It is that **suffering** that should cause us **agony** and disrupt us enough to love like Christ loved - that risky, beautiful, painful, transformative love.

1. If you have you seen the theology that claims that **suffering** brings us closer to Christ used to keep people in terrible situations, what were the results?
2. What do you find helpful about St. Clair's understanding of the difference between **agony, suffering** and **pain**? What, if anything, is problematic about it?
3. Who is it risky for you to love? How can you love them in helpful ways?
4. How would a philosophy of *ubuntu* benefit our society today?



Foolish Love is the Hope of  
Easter!

## **Foolish Love is the Hope of Easter!**

**Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25**

It is three days after the crucifixion, and Jesus remains in the tomb.

**APRIL FOOLS!**

Ok, so technically April 1 is the day after Easter this year, but if there was ever a day that represents a surprise pulled on all of us, it is Easter! And what a glorious surprise it is!

If there was ever a story that was hard to explain, it is also Easter. It defies everything we know. People do not die and then raise up three days later. We are talking nonsense. What kind of story are we trying to tell here anyway?

It had to be a hard sell. The Gospels themselves speak of the tensions in sharing the Easter message. In the original ending of Mark, no one does tell! The women hear the words of the angel, and they run away terrified and tell no one. Luke includes the story of the travelers to Emmaus, both at a loss for what they have experienced, but then a helpful stranger calls them to understanding by unfolding the Scriptures. And then that stranger reveals himself as the Risen Christ! John shares Thomas' story of doubt. Matthew includes details about a guard being set at the tomb to make sure people don't steal Jesus' body and then tell lies that Jesus was raised – a story that is important to give veracity to the resurrection. But Matthew also tells us that as people gathered around the *Risen Christ* to worship him, some still doubted.

The story we call central to our faith is a beautiful, powerful, transformative story. But it is also a foolish one. It is a foolish one because it defies regular

explanation. And it is not just the resurrection that makes no sense. It is also foolish to follow a man who was condemned to death for crimes against the state and against the religious status quo.

Can you imagine how absurd it was to live through that story? To be the disciples and have the fear of all they went through leading up to the crucifixion, then having to face the devastating loss of their friend and the man they thought was the Messiah, only to have the uncanny surprise of Easter morning? It is no wonder that Peter, even after encountering Christ resurrected, decided to go back to fishing – at least at first.

But as absurd as it is for the disciples to have this story to share, imagine being Paul! Paul had persecuted the very people who shared this story, only to have his own dramatic encounter with Christ and then switch to telling the very story he swore was not true.

Paul didn't just start to believe the story, he founded churches all around the Mediterranean based on that story. The Corinthian church was likely one of them. Yet as he has left them to their own devices, they have started telling the story differently. And Paul acknowledges the difficulty of the Gospel. He knows that the cross is "scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." (1 Cor 1:23) Yet what looks like foolishness to us, an accident of history that should have never happened, contains all of the wisdom and redemptive love of God.

Holy Week must have been as disorienting to the disciples and the crowds following Jesus as the fall of the Berlin wall was to Germans. As I recount in the video, the Berlin Wall came down due to an unprepared spokesperson, an unclear memo, and a confused chain of command. The people who put the policy in place



certainly didn't expect they were undoing decades of confinement and division, and yet that is exactly what happened. What was meant to perpetuate power and oppression instead undid them. Happy Easter!

Still, I remember the day it happened. I remember how stunned the world was. There was disbelief that it would result in lasting change. Fear of war. Suspicion it was a trick. But no, it was God working weirdly in history – finding freedom and life in a poorly worded memo! Just as God took an instrument of death and torture and turned it into a sign of that same freedom and life.

And yet, doubts still persist. Questions are still raised. Honestly, I am confident that God expects such things. But step back and look at the truth of the story – the truth that God will always meet our hate with love, meet our violence with healing, meet our death with life. That is a story worth living for.

Sometimes I do have people ask me, "If it all turns out to just be a story, if it isn't true that Jesus rose from the grave, how will you feel about your life then? Will you have lived your life as a fool because you gave your life to this Gospel?" Usually this question comes from a practicing atheist who insists their way is correct. The way I see it, the result is the same whether atheism or Christianity is true. Either way I have lived as a fool, but as a follower of Christ my foolishness is that I have loved people. Imperfect people. Selfish people. Hurting people. Angry people. Gifted people. Poor people. Rich people. Different people. People like me. What a foolish thing to do with my time?!?! And what an incredible life it will have been. And all of it is inspired by the story of Jesus Christ.

So bring on the foolishness, whether it is April 1 or not! May you and I always love as foolishly as Jesus loved, and may we always have each other along as companions in this life of Foolish Love!

1. What doubts or questions do you have about the cross and the resurrection? What has been helpful in navigating those doubts?
2. What is the most foolish act of love you have ever seen?
3. If you have you seen something that looked like a disaster waiting to happen become something amazing and beautiful, how can you see Jesus at work in that moment?
4. What have you learned about love as you have taken this Lenten journey?

## 1 Corinthians 13 Lenten Exercise

The blanks in the passage below are where the word “love” (or pronouns referring to love) have been removed. Fill in your name in the blanks. Then, read this out loud at least once a day. Celebrate the ways you love well in the phrases that feel natural. Make a commitment to work on whatever sounds a little off to say. In all things, know that Jesus loves you like this, and has confidence that you can love like he loves.

\_\_\_\_\_ is patient, \_\_\_\_\_  
is kind, \_\_\_\_\_ isn't jealous,  
\_\_\_\_\_ doesn't brag,  
\_\_\_\_\_ isn't  
arrogant, \_\_\_\_\_ isn't rude,  
\_\_\_\_\_ doesn't seek its own  
advantage, \_\_\_\_\_ isn't irritable,  
\_\_\_\_\_ doesn't keep a record of  
complaints, \_\_\_\_\_ isn't happy  
with injustice, but \_\_\_\_\_ is  
happy with the truth. \_\_\_\_\_  
puts up with all things,  
\_\_\_\_\_ trusts in all things,  
\_\_\_\_\_ hopes for all things,  
\_\_\_\_\_ endures all things.  
\_\_\_\_\_ never fails.