

Preacher: Last Sunday you heard of the ruggedness of the cross. This Sunday you will hear about the foolishness of the cross. For Paul says to the Corinthians, "The cross is foolish." But to those of us who are being saved, it is the power and the wisdom of God. On Good Friday, 1984, Father Carl Kabat donned a clown outfit and a red nose, jumped over a government fence in North Dakota and began hammering on a Minuteman II guided missile. For this act of priestly clowning around, Father Kabat received six years in a federal penitentiary. And yet today's scripture reminds us there is precedent for this sort of behavior. "Do you know my pastor?" she asked me, "He's really your stereo-typical perfect pastor", she said. "He's always late to meetings, "he forgot my sister's wedding, "his car is always a wreck, you get it on the front seat, "he has to remove all his books and papers "and throw them in the back seat. "The other night he called me here at Duke "at 20 minutes after midnight and he said "that God had put me on his mind and he wondered "how I was doing, he is the perfect pastor." And I thought to myself, I wonder-- you have to wonder what this means in the life of this organized, upwardly-mobile, would-be successful, high-achieving kind of undergraduate. What effect this disorganized pastor has. And I remember, a friend of mine, Walter Brueggemann, writing a book on youth ministry, a number of years ago, saying that the primary characteristic for the effective youth minister is to be crazy for youths. Not just crazy about youth, but crazy in behalf of youth. For there is an important kind of pastoral craziness that gives young developing minds room. Room to roam and revision and envision and that's important. Such a pastoral fool may be a living reminder that the gospel is not about establishment but rather revolt. Not settled accomodation but rather destabilization of present arrangements. And thus, Paul writing to the Corinthians, the Corinthians who knew so much about so much. He writes, "The message of the cross is foolishness "to those who are perishing, "but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God." It is written how we'll destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? The debater of this age has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? God decided through foolishness to save those who believe. Christ crucified, stumbling block to Jews, foolishness to Gentiles. But Christ, God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, God's weakness is stronger than human strength. "The cross is moria, moronic," Paul says. Most Methodists believe that the Methodist movement stems from John Wesley's stirring, heart-warming experience at Aldersgate Street. But a Wesleyan scholar like our Richard Hudson-Ryder can argue that maybe a significant conversion in Wesley's journey occurred when in his journal he wrote, having been excluded from many respectable pulpits, he wrote, "On this day I submitted to be even more vial and submitted to the level of field preaching". And you can see this proper little Oxford scholar going out into the field to preach to coal miners and the wretched of the Earth. As Bonhoeffer put it, "It is no small thing that God allowed himself "to be pushed out of the world on a cross." Or Paul, "God chose what is foolish, Moria, in the world to confound the wise." Romans 1:27. One of the earliest renditions of Jesus on a cross shows a body on a cross with a head of an ass from the Catacomb of Callixtus. Hebrew says Christ was crucified outside the gate. Outside the gate. And he wasn't just speaking geographically, he was crucified outside the bounds of our respectability, our cause-effect rationality. He came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday bouncing on the back of an ass. He died outside our definitions of success and wisdom. And there was in him, there was in him... Even before the cross, a kind of playful

foolishness in his teaching. About the sewer who went out to sew and refused to prepare the ground properly but just started slinging seed everywhere. Or when they asked him about the Kingdom of God, he said, the Kingdom of God is like a man that had a fig tree that was unproductive for three years and he says to his servant, "cut it down", and his servant said, "Oh master forgive, forgive the tree. "Let me dig around it and put some dung on it." And Jesus says sometimes God is like that. It wasn't that Jesus was being unreasonable, it was that he was exercising a different brand of rationality than that of the world. Because after one has made a statement like, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Jesus Christ", then all world irrationals are thrown up for grabs. This gospel today, John opens his gospel with Jesus tearing in the temple, turning over tables and driving out the money changers and screaming at people. Most of the other gospels tastefully leave this toward the end of the story, after we've sort of gotten to know Jesus. John sticks it right up front. It's just a reminder that Jesus is in the business of turning over tables and driving respectable people away from the temple. And yet, I'll admit, and yet there is this sort of tiresome tendency within the Christian faith in our hands to be transformed from sign of outrage and contradiction, sign of insubordination and usurpation to transform it in Tom Wright's words, "to the cement of social conformity". As I have said there is this sort of relentless temptation for the church to degenerate in the rotary. I'm part of it! Couple of spring breaks ago I took a group of random seniors on a retreat. The name of the retreat was, "Jesus For Those Who've Heard Something About Him But Not Yet Ready To Put Their Money Down On Him." And I said on this retreat, I'm going to do everything at my disposal to kind of, wrestle you into discipleship. I'm going to do whatever I can to confront you with Jesus so that your life might be changed. But don't get nervous, I'm a Methodist, it probably won't work. (crowd laughter) But, first night we showed them this tape of Max McLean, here at Duke chapel going through this act, going through the gospel of Mark. Just straight through the gospel of Mark, start to finish. We get through. I could tell the group was moved, just moved by just nothing but this gospel. Guy sitting there, hair down below his shoulders, sitting there, tears in his eyes and he said, "You know Jesus is cool. "I could see-- I knew-- I wasn't surprised "how this story ended, I knew he was going to get killed. "I knew after 15 minutes, somebody's gonna kill him! "You do not let people, you do not let a guy say "that kind of stuff about people, who doesn't get killed. "So, I knew he was gonna get killed. "And I also can understand why he attracted a crowd, "because anybody that strange "is going to have people interested in him." And I said, "Good, good, yes, yes". He said, "one thing I don't understand". I said, "well what is that? Maybe I can help you with it". He said, "I can understand how he got killed, "I can understand why people followed him, "but I do not understand, you know, "how you get from that, like, Jesus, "to over here, like, church. "I can't understand how you start out with somebody "like Jesus and end up with most of the Christians "I know that are so damned boring." (crowd laughter) And I said, "You know, now I'm remembering "why it was not a good idea to take people like you "out on a retreat like this!" (crowd laughter) There is a certain kind of foolishness required in any creative thinking. A playful willingness to roam, to revision, to seek odd connections between things that were not there previously. I sometimes wondered, one reason maybe mainline Christianity appears to be in death throes, it's the kind of people we attract to seminary. It's-- we just, we seem to have in our leadership a high proportion of those who want to keep house. To confirm and conform and too few who want to play and confront and disrupt and revision and envision. As Paul says, "God chose what is foolish in the world "to just confound the wise." Or else we're, in first Corinthians, he says, "We're fools for Christ's sake. I ran into this man awhile back, he's the president a thriving corporation and he told me that a man that was a member of my former congregation, he had just made into vice-president of marketing in his corporation. And I said, "Gosh that's

amazing, "he's really then gone up the ladder then." "Yes, yes, yes." And he said, "You know, he's somewhat of a fool." And I said, "Well now we knew that at church, "but I'm surprised that you knew that. "And I'm also surprised you'd make a man like that "your vice-president of marketing." And he said, "Yeah, he's a fool," he said, "he's got about one good idea "for every 10 ideas he comes up. "About nine out of 10 of his ideas "are some of the stupidest things "I've ever heard of in my life." And I said, "Well then that just makes it all the more odd "you would make someone like that vice-president." He said, "Wait a minute, he's the only guy I got "that ever comes up with one good idea!" (crowd laughter) Tom Wright in a sermon on this passage suggests that we honor St. Simeon of Salos, a Palestinian monk of the sixth century who came into a Good Friday service eating a sausage and then proceeded to throw nuts at the candles on the alter during the service. Lest in even our repentance we take ourselves too seriously. St. Francis of Assisi was often called the new fool because he stripped down and cut free and roamed beyond the bounds of convention. Staying at the home of Sir Thomas More, Erasmus penned, "Encomium Moriae, In Praise of Folly". In which Erasmus says that he gets right into the heart of the Christian faith when he talks about all the kinds of moronic foolishness we humans engage in. He talks about the foolishness of people who go to war to bring peace. Of people who accumulate material possessions in order to feel secure. Of people who foolishly fall in love. Erasmus says you should thank your parents for being such fools, or you wouldn't be here. Because any rational person sitting down to think about all the trouble that love brings and the difficulty of children would go into a monastery at once. But then Erasmus says there are no fools greater than those who give away all they have to the poor. Who suffer slander and injuries and overlook wrongs and abuse. And consider the goal of their life to be a cross. Erasmus says no wonder Festus thought Paul was mad and no wonder the world's first judgment upon the church is in axe to their drunk. Fools for Christ's sake. And there is in me, God help me, the tendency to reduce the gospel, the playful gospel foolishness to social accomodation. Even to stand up and preach is to imply that the gospel is more reasonable than it really is. How many Sundays I stand up, we've read some perfectly ridiculous passage of scripture and I can almost feel it, as the scripture is being read, I can almost feel you getting tense, everybody tensing up. And I stand up in the pulpit and I say give me 20 minutes and I can explain this to you. He didn't really mean hate your mother, all right? He meant, put the old lady in proper perspective. He didn't mean go give away everything you've got, that would be irresponsible, how could you pay tuition? (crowd laughter) He meant to just scale down to a Toyota or something. That's what he meant! See, you've got no problem here, all right? Everybody feel better? We can go home and have lunch. But no, we are walking here, we are moving here, just a couple of weeks to a cross. And there's just no way to kind of crank that down to fit into the available rationalities. Well I met her her freshman year and she was gorgeous and intelligent and privileged and all might have been well, but she went on one of these Duke Chapel mission teams, went down to Honduras, met him down there, he was also a Duke student, they hadn't met. He was president of his fraternity, he was pre-med, they were down there in Honduras. When they came back, someone got a hold of her, she was different, she was discontent, she was troubled, she was also in love with this person. And at graduation they announced that they were going and giving themselves to running an orphanage down in South America for street children. And I saw her mother over commencement weekend and her mother said to me, "I've got a bone to pick with you! "What do you think about what my daughter "is going to do after graduation?" And I said, "I just think it's wonderful, "it's just a, it's a real sign of her Christian commitment, "you should be proud." She said, "Well how would you feel "if it were your daughter?" I said, "Oh I'd be terrified!" She said, "Well thanks!" (crowd laughter) And she said, "When I think of her ability, "when I think

of the money spent on a Duke education "when I think of the possibilities. "I'll tell you what I think, "I think she, for the first time in her life, "as long as I've known her as my daughter, "I think she's being a fool!" And I said, "For Christ's sake." (crowd laughter)