



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## ***The Wisdom of Foolishness***

**The Rev, Sharon Gracen**

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“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” These immortal words written by John Newton in 1748 explain what happened within the heart of this British slave trader when he turned to God during a storm at sea. Having previously turned his back on all things religious, he was surprised to have prayed for deliverance and at the apparent response. He was a changed man and after retiring from the sea he was ordained as an Anglican priest. Among those who heard him preach was William Wilberforce, one of the leading voices for the abolition of slavery in Britain. You know the story.

What you may not know is what it cost Britain to lead the free world into freeing others. “On the eve of the British abolition of slave-trading, British ships carried 52% of the slaves transported across the Atlantic, and British colonies produced more than half of the world’s sugar. Without new slaves, those colonies in the New World were devastated and Britain’s great enemy, France, benefited enormously. So did the U.S. British Sugar production fell 25% in the first three decades after abolition, while production in competing slave economies rose by 210%. The British navy led the way in trying to suppress the slave trade. This led to the loss of some 5000 British lives, plus higher taxes for the British people. Britain found itself in open conflict with rival military powers – leading to war in Brazil and near wars elsewhere. But Great Britain did not flinch and eventually their example inspired France, the US and Cuba to ban slave imports. By 1867, 60 years after the Britain ban, the transatlantic slave trade was ended. Over those 60 years, Britain sacrificed greatly. Translated into today’s dollars, the British economy lost \$14 trillion.<sup>1</sup> It leads one to wonder whether or not they would have held firm had they known the cost. Economically, it was foolish. Morally and spiritually, it was the wise thing to do. Somehow, an understanding of what Paul tried to teach his congregation in Corinth took hold of the British collective mind and spirit – “If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.”

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<sup>1</sup> Kristof, Nicholas and WuDunn, Sheryl; *Half the Sky*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 2009



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I hope that you hear what a huge idea this is. It goes straight to the heart of knowing ourselves as spiritual beings, much more than our human experience would indicate. It's the difference between spiritual laws and human laws. Great moments in human history happen when spiritual laws begin to break through the fog of human self-interest. Why would people willingly put themselves in harm's way? Why would a single Chinese man face down a tank in Tiananmen Square? Why would black citizens of the South walk into the sure response of fire hoses, billy clubs and snarling police dogs. Why would anyone ever think that an armed foe could be overcome by unarmed, non-violent resistance? It looks foolish in the same way that David looked foolish going up against Goliath.

Jesus' teaching today flies in the face of human wisdom. Last fall, I told you about the "turn the other cheek" passage but let me remind you that Jesus wasn't saying, "stand there and take a beating because you're nice." He was saying "don't let anyone hit you with a dismissive, backhand swat and treat you like an underling. Turn and offer them the opportunity to hit you like an equal because you are." This teaching has been lifted up by a favorite theologian of mine, Professor Walter Wink. His writing on the Powers and Principalities of this world illustrate the foolishness of what passes for human wisdom.

Professor Wink describes the "myth of redemptive violence." In a nutshell, humankind has generally ascribed to the belief that enough violence, usually in the form of bigger and badder weapons, will make us safe. The Gatling gun was the Civil War's weapon that was going to end warfare. Surely people would see that its destructive power was so much great that war would now become implausible if not impossible. The problem with this line of thinking is that there's always a bigger gun to be made. World War I brought us machine guns and mustard gas. World War II gave us B-52s and atomic bombs. Human wisdom says, to be safe, you've got to have the biggest weapons and the strongest army. However, even a cursory glance at human history will tell you that violence begets more violence, in an ever escalating spiral. The myth of redemptive violence has yet to be proved true. Someone always comes up with something worse, and we are not saved. So when are we going to figure out that we are being foolish?

The paradoxes of Jesus' ministry all point to this truth. The least on earth is greater than all others in heaven; the last shall be first, give in order to receive, lose your life to have true life. On the surface, human level, it makes no sense. But in the heart and mind of God, Jesus' paradoxical teaching is basic wisdom.

Paul also talked about the foundation, the wisdom, on which we build. If we build our lives on the Christ foundation, it will look very different from a life built on a foundation promoted by human understanding, desires and values. The spiritual foundation that is Christ is one of unity and wholeness. But the world says look out for #1, be suspicious of anyone different. Jesus' foundation is peace. He says, "Don't resist evil with

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force, turn the other cheek and resist without violence.” The world says arm yourself. Christ as our sure foundation says, “Don’t be afraid.” The world produces Glenn Beck and he pays him a lot of money for his crazy conspiracy theories – “Be very afraid!” Jesus, the eternal Word of God says, “remember, I with you always.” And yet, so many feel lonely, sad and depressed. The world says, “take a pill and get on Facebook.”

All of this is being played out for us right now in Cairo, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen and who knows where next. Brave people have come together to say that they will no longer be struck on the right cheek like a slave. They have brought their struggle out into the light and the world is watching. On Friday, the Bahraini military had opened fire on peaceful demonstrators. But by Saturday, the demonstrators were in the square again and the military had been pulled back. The exposure of such injustice and violence was causing the government of Bahrain to rethink their use of force.

Too much of the world it is foolish to educate girls or to get them to the doctor when they are sick. Their families don’t think that these girls have any value. The awakening that is happening around the world about the worth of women is marvelously chronicled in a book called *Half the Sky*, by Nicholas Kristof and his wife Sheryl WuDunn. The plight of girls around the world is still dire, often because the world is indifferent, but traditional wisdom is being exposed for its folly as women are empowered through education, access to health care and a role in the economic life of their countries. It is most exciting to see that in countries in which women become valued citizens, there is more economic stability and less violence.

The world’s foolishness generally manifests in big, systemic ways and so it is difficult to undo. But as the people of Britain showed, it is worth doing. Within our own lives, change can come more swiftly if we recognize our folly and know the foundation upon which we build our future. Embracing God’s wisdom does not necessarily mean that life will be instantly easy and perfect but that is not our purpose. Our purpose is to allow God’s mission and wisdom to be realized through our lives. How sweet to sing, we once were lost but now are found, were blind, but now we see. Amen and Alleluia!