

“The Wisdom of Foolishness” (1 Samuel 25:1-35)
by Peter Goerzen
July 31, 2016, Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church

A fool's tale

Well, this story of Nabal, Abigail, and David is a fool's tale if there ever was one. Nabal has a fool's name, meaning, namely, “fool.” Now in the Old Testament, in the Hebrew Scriptures, there are a number of different kinds of fools. There are the sort of fools who are a bit dimwitted, but not altogether malicious.

For example, those fools simply lacking in prudence or common sense (Prov. 26:11), but not all-together malicious. It's like how when I was in college, some of my friends and I thought it would be a good idea to make a Druber's run at 3am the night before our oral exams in our capstone Bible and religion course.

And there are those fools who talk too much and don't realize that people might think them intelligent if they'd shut their mouths a little bit more (Prov. 17:28). And then there are those fools in the Hebrew Bible who are ignorant and just downright proud of it (Prov. 13:16), and who are increasingly common in our political discourse.

But not Nabal. He is a different kind of fool. You don't get to being filthy rich in the wilderness without a good bit of shrewd business sense. And you don't keep three thousand sheep and a thousand goats alive in the desert for very long at all unless you've got a carefully calculating mind and a good allotment of common sense and prudence. Nabal is a fool, no doubt, but he is not stupid.

David and the Wild West

David was rather used to dealing with fools. David was to become Israel's king, and a mighty king he would be, but he wasn't king yet, not by a long shot. David had been much too occupied fleeing from Israel's current king, the paranoid and emotionally unstable King Saul, all over the land of Israel.

David was incredibly charismatic and mighty in battle and popular among the people, which had made the current delusional king incredibly jealous and enraged and paranoid, no doubt fearing that David was secretly plotting to usurp the throne. And so the foolish king Saul gathered three thousand men to hunt down this “single flea” in the wilderness.

Over the course of his outlaw days in the wilderness, David had attracted quite a few people who were discontented with the current administration – some six hundred of them. And these six hundred fled with him to the region of Maon, where they encountered the shrewd and rich fool Nabal. David fled one fool, only to stumble over another out in the wilderness!

So David and his men were out in the wilderness, out beyond the reach of the rule of law (sort of like the Wild West of ancient Israel), a safe haven of sorts for outlaws like David.

And also for outlaws *not* like David – the kind who were guilty of more than just intimidating a paranoid king with their popularity – wilderness riff raff, thieves, bandits, marauders, and the like who preyed upon travelers and raided small villages and plundered flocks grazing in the hills. And apparently it was so bad that when David later left his camp to seek out Nabal, he had to leave 200 of his men behind just to guard it!

David and his men set themselves up as a vigilante wilderness police force – outlaws who kept the law. And they guarded Nabal's flocks from bandits while they were grazing in the wilderness. So when the flocks came in for the shearing festival, David sent some of his men to

ask Nabal to return the kindness out of the plenty of his flocks that David had protected. Protection money, you might call it.

A Fool's Pride

So the men of David came to Nabal to ask this favor, saying, “Shalom, shalom, shalom! Shalom to you. Shalom to your house. Shalom to all that you have.” And they waited while Nabal glared at them. And they waited while his blood boiled. And waited for this shrewd fool's answer to David, the son of Jesse who has become famous throughout the land..

So finally Nabal gets his justification in order and answers the men of the famous son of Jesse, not by returning shalom, but in his surliest voice, “Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse who pals around with wilderness riff-raff?” Why, Nabal could be a campaign manager! “Where's his birth certificate? Where are his tax returns? How much do we really know about him, hmmmm?”

Nabal is shrewd. He is cunning and clever. He is a good businessman. He is wealthy and successful. But he is a fool. You see, Nabal is the worst kind of fool. He is the kind of fool who is good at turning half-truths into personal gain. He is the kind of fool whose success at the expense of others makes him appear wise. He is the kind of fool who thinks himself to be a self-made man.

“Why should *I* give *my* goods and *my* food that *I* worked hard to earn to a lazy band of shady outlaws?!”

A Psalm of David describes the sort of fool Nabal is: “Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds” (Psalm 14:1; 53:1).

The fool Nabal thinks he has no need of God or of God's ways. He has made *his own* way. He made his own success by his own two hands by his own ways. He has worked hard, expanded his holding, dealt shrewdly, and prospered. He doesn't need God, doesn't need David's protection and or anyone else's help for that matter. Nabal is his own man. He can't be bought.

And he is a fool with a fool's pride.

And that kind of fool is perhaps the most contemptuous term in the Bible. It is the height of folly to live as though there is no God, and to live as though God's ways of justice and shalom are silly, naïve, and restrictive. Jesus once told a parable about one such rich fool, you may recall... (Luke 12:13-21)

A Fool's Corpse

Now if you read on a little further in this story of Nabal and Abigail and David, you will find that when Abigail returns to Nabal, she finds him completely drunk from a huge party that he had thrown. So Abigail waits until the next day to tell Nabal of what happened.

Now leading such a life of hatred and anger and scheming and hoarding and debauchery tends to take a toll on a person's body, and when Nabal hears of how this backlands outlaw David received enough food from him quite literally to feed an entire army, he has a heart attack, lies in a coma for ten days, and then dies, his whole life having collapsed in on him, leaving only a fool's corpse.

The name Nabal, the fool's name, comes from a word meaning collapse, or similarly, a corpse. You see, if you live as though there is no God; if you live as though God's ways of righteousness and justice and mercy and shalom are mere foolishness, you may get rich, you may prosper, you may become popular and powerful.

But ultimately, you will find that you have built your empire, your future, your hope,

your life, your society like the foolish man who built his house upon sand, and it will all collapse and come crashing down. Spectacularly dressed up on the outside but dead and rotting on the inside.

The Psalmists speak of violence returning upon the heads of the violent, who fall into their own pit (7:15-16). The very sword the wicked wield to oppress the poor and righteous will enter their own heart (37:14). Their own mischief overwhelms them as burning coals fall upon them (140:9-10). It is God's sovereign judgment that those fools who would choose darkness instead of light are free to do so (e.g. John 3:17-21), and will suffer the tragic consequences of their own folly, whether in this age or in the age to come.

Jesus once said that those who live by the sword die by the sword (Matthew 26:52). Those who live by folly will, sooner or later, discover that all that folly leaves behind is a decaying corpse.

Because no matter how corrupted and distorted by the power of Sin this world has become, no matter how long it permits those fools of nearsighted self-ambition to prosper, it is still fundamentally God's world, created by God, reflecting God's character, being redeemed by God, and ultimately, all ways other than God's ways collapse and fade away.

Nabal is a fool, and his downfall is upon him. Pride being the hallmark of foolishness, and thinking himself the author of his own achievement and destiny, needing no man, and needing to help no man, Nabal hurls insults at David, calling him nothing but a common desert thug. He has returned evil for good.

A Tale of Two Fools

Now that's nothing new for David. David had served his mortal enemy, Saul King of Israel, with complete faithfulness, and yet Saul has been hunting him across the wilderness to kill him, returning evil for good. But even then, David defended Saul before those who would have liked to have seen him dead because, unlike fools who say there is no God, he trusted the Lord to deal justly with Saul (1 Sam. 24:12-15).

In fact, if you flip back a chapter in the story, you will find that David quite literally caught King Saul with his pants down, and yet so full of God was he that he did not even take the perfect opportunity to kill Saul, and Saul was forced to acknowledge that David was the more righteous for repaying good for evil,¹ and that he would be king.

So I don't know what the deal is with David here. I don't know why he gets all worked up over a fool's insult. Maybe the constant wariness of the outlaw life finally boiled over and he snapped. Maybe the pressure cooker of restrained self-righteous indignation finally blew a gasket. Maybe he figured to make an example of this peon of a shepherd who would challenge the authority of the Lord's Anointed.

At any rate, David, who staid his own hand even against his mortal enemy, now rallies his men, calls to arms, rattles his saber, lathers himself up in the self-righteous indignation of his insulted pride, and marches for war, or, more accurately, for massacre, all because of a prideful, insolent fool's insult. David was once full of God. Now he's just full of himself, and innocent people are going to pay.

The prideful marches on the proud, and the cycle of violence continues. Nabal is not the only man who acts foolishly in this story.

Now as is the case with most battles, it is the pawns who have the least to gain and the most to lose. And somehow word spreads – and I doubt if it was by accident – from David's

1 Might be interesting to rewrite this sermon with a stronger Rom. 12 connection, instead of Php. 2 / 1 Cor. 1.

camp to Nabal's servants that David has a bloodbath in mind. And three thousand years later, you can still almost hear Abigail's exasperated sigh, and you can almost see her rolling her eyes when she hears about these foolish men with their saber rattling and their feather ruffling and their chest puffing and hot air.

A Christly mind

So Abigail intends to put a stop to this foolish bloodbath. She gathers up enough food to feed not only David's army, but Saul's also, and when David sees her, he is stopped in his tracks.

And Abigail, the only sensible one of the whole lot, says, "I'm sorry."

She who is there to prevent David from committing a bloody iniquity of hasty vengeance that could cost him the throne, grovels before his feet! Is there not an ounce of justice left in the earth?

David deserves a swift smack upside the head, but here this wise, righteous woman presents him with a festival's worth of food, bows at his feet, and takes the guilt for her fool of a husband! Abigail, twice the victim of folly, takes the blame for one fool and apologizes to another!

Long ago, the prophet Isaiah wrote, "We have all gone astray like sheep; we have all turned to our *own* way. And the Lord has delivered him over to our sins" (53:6)

When the first generation of believers read this in Isaiah, something clicked for them. They realized that this was precisely their experience in Christ Jesus, God's righteous One, God's suffering servant, who through his own humble identification with the guilt and sin and folly of humankind had laid the true ugliness of sin and rebellion and violence bare upon the cross as he suffered as a righteous man and provided liberation from sin for those who in turn identified with him and his way.

Paul once counseled the church in Philippi: "In humility regard others as better than yourselves. . . Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on the cross."

"Have this same mind among you." In God's justice, it is not the proudhearted, but the meek, who inherit the earth. In God's power, it is by death that the one who wields the power of death is overcome. In God's reign, it is a child born into rags who is the world's true sovereign.

In God's world, it is never kings or princes or generals or presidents with their swords or guns or bombs or drones that can bring about justice and security; it is compassion; it is self-giving love, it is risky humility, it is overcoming evil with good, it is the servant who puts more trust in an empty tomb than in "the rockets' red glare." "Have this same mind among you."

Could it be that Abigail was a woman ahead of her time, having the mind of Christ before he was revealed? Or, more properly, could it be that the mind of Christ, the Wisdom of God, was shaped fundamentally by a tradition that preserved, valued, and told this remarkable story of a woman of incredible courage and wisdom?

Abigail had not spoken with the men that David sent, and she reminds David that Nabal's folly was in fact no fault of her own. Nabal and David are responsible. She is not, and they both know it. Yet she will intercede. She will bear the consequence of these two fools' actions, but she will not excuse them from responsibility.²

2 Great care is required with this move. Feminist critiques of atonement and kenotic theologies are particularly salient. Theology can easily perpetuate cycles of abuse. As a corrective, Ruth Groenhout argues, "Self-sacrifice, properly understood, requires that one have a robust sense of the self that is to be emptied." Self-sacrifice is

She is righteous, blameless, and both she and David know it. Even so, she is willing to humble herself. She doesn't have to, but she will, of her own free will, and out of her own sense of self-worth, bear the folly of her husband, and of her enemy too, in order to lay that violence bare and avert disaster. She will speak the truth in power out of her own inner authority.

God's shalom breaks out

David looks down to see one standing in for his enemy, Nabal, but she is not Nabal. What do you do when suddenly your anger, your pride, your foolishness is redirected upon the very embodiment of innocence, humility, and wisdom?

It is like looking in a mirror and seeing your true self unmasked for the very first time – both who you are, and who God meant you to be. You can either run away from it to remain a fool while your world collapses around you, or you can step up to it to be filled with God and with God's ways. Nabal chose one way, but David simply could not remain unchanged. Suddenly his anger, his pride, his foolishness melted away. “Go up to your house in peace,” he said. And there was no bloodbath.

Abigail comes riding a humble beast, a donkey. She brings an offering for Nabal's folly and transgression. She puts herself forward as one to bear the guilt, instead of the fool Nabal and his innocent servants. She humbly trusts the Lord. She proclaims the reign of the Lord's Anointed. She speaks the truth to those in power. She makes peace between those who are far off, and later humbles herself to wash the feet of David's servants. And through her humble faithfulness, God's shalom broke out. (Sound like anyone you know?)

There is one more fool, in this story, you see. The kind of fool who would dare to proclaim the mighty are brought low and the lowly are lifted up. The kind who would believe someone who would say, “If you try to secure your life, you'll lose it; if you give your life, you'll secure it.” The kind who thinks the last will be first and the first will be last, and if you want to be great, you have to be a servant. The kind of fool who would repay good for evil and believes there to be more power in plowshares than in swords, who would step in front of a bullet rather than fire one.

The message of the cross, you see, is utter nonsense to a collapsing world. But for the foolishly humble, it is the power of God for salvation.

Abigail is the kind of fool who knows God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. She shares the humble mind of Christ, repaying even good for evil, exposing violence for the folly that it is, that others may experience God's shalom.

Christ Jesus is our peace. He prepares a grand festival and banquet of shalom for us before the foolishness of the world. Let us partake in foolhardy humility, as people of God's peace, that even the worst kinds of fools may know God's shalom.

proper, Groenhout argues, “precisely when it aims to stop or limit the destruction of other people or of healthy social relations.” See Ruth Groenhout, “Kenosis and Feminist Theory,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).