

John Sampson

“Card Zero”

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10 - 18

Preached at KVCC

January 26, 2020

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

Today, I've brought my deck of tarot cards to worship.

For some of you, you might be familiar with what tarot cards are, and for others they may be new to you.

Tarot cards are often used as a tool of divination, a technology of telling something about one's future. You might think going to someone named something like Madame Zora in a little dim shop in Greenwich Village, where for a price the Madame will have you shuffle the cards, and then begin to flip the cards over and arrange them in a pattern on the table top. And as the Madame does so she will tell you things about yourself, and about things about to happen. I've had my cards read a couple of times and it's always fun, and never correct. I was supposed to have married a woman, with short blond hair, by now, had a bunch of kids, and have been very, very wealthy.

I guess there's still time! I'm not dead yet!

So here's a little bit more about the tarot. It's divided into two sequences of cards. The first is called the minor arcana and these are the cards that most resemble our regular playing cards. There are four suits: swords, pentacles, cups and wands. And the cards in each suit go from the ace to the king. The other sequence of cards is known as the major arcana, and those cards, with the exception of one of them, have no echo in our playing cards.

The major arcana contains twenty two cards, each having a title, and an image filled with arcane and occult signs. These cards contain within them, and within their sequence, a map of the spiritual development, and potential of each human person. So here are a couple of examples.

The major arcana contains such cards as The Hermit. An image of a robed man holding a lantern, which will be familiar to all of you Led Zeppelin fans from their Led Zeppelin IV album.

There is also the Death card. With a skulled warrior riding across a body strewn battle field. “I have become death, the destroyer of worlds,” as Oppenheimer said.

Here is the Devil imprisoning humanity in chains, chains we could easily remove if we just tried.

And the Tower, showing us how the architecture of our hubris is felled in one bolt from heaven.

And finally, The World, with images of the evangelists in the corners of the card surrounding a circular wreath, which is a Jungian symbol for the integration of all opposites.

But the one card from the major arcana, which has evolved in our playing cards into the Joker, should be familiar to us, if none of the others is. It is The Fool; and it is pictured on the cover of your bulletin. In some decks, like the one I have The Fool is number zero; in others it is number twenty-two. It is both the first card of the sequence, and the last. Foolishness, for the creators of the tarot, is the alpha and the omega of all human spiritual development.

And we can dismiss the wisdom of the cards as being nothing more than a prop used by people like Madame Zora to hustle a buck out of the naïve, out of the desperate, or out of the fun seekers, just like me, and maybe some of you too.

Except, that we find the idea of foolishness in our reading today, and it is connected to one of the seminal symbols, if not THE seminal symbol, of our sacred tradition. The apostle Paul tells us that the cross, the tool of Jesus' execution, is nothing less than foolishness. It is a symbol that can do nothing if not provoke mockery, and laughter, and condescension. The cross is a joke in bad taste, for the crudest of us all. And he's not alone. The nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche thought the cross was a symbol of resentment, and a tool of the slave classes in their pursuit of revolution over the ruling order.

Think about it. The cross is the very symbol of the failure of a dream. It is the literal tool that we are told executed Jesus, who taught that God had never forgotten the poor, and the diseased, and the weak. The blessing of "the least of these" was silenced by the cross. And for Christians, those of us who try to follow the message of Jesus in our lives, to choose this symbol as the sign to identify our teacher, and his teachings, is foolishness. To choose the symbol of defeat as a sign of victory is foolishness. If the tarot card entitled The Fool holds an image of a youth two steps away from calamity, the cross is surely the image of that calamity.

And maybe just like those who go to Madame Zora, those of us who hold onto the cross are just too naïve and too desperate, and allow ourselves to be taken in by a scam, perhaps the greatest scam of all.

But I told you that The Fool was in some decks numbered as the last card of the major arcana, number twenty-two. But in other decks, like my deck, it is number zero. It is the

first card. It is the spiritual state that makes all of the other movements of awakening possible.

To see the cross as nothing more than defeat numbers it as the final state, the final card in Christianity's deck. But what if we renumbered the deck and inverted the order? What if the cross wasn't the end, but the beginning? What if all of the other teachings, and stories, and traditions of Jesus that we will engage are presupposed by the cross? What if the cross is what makes all of the other movements of our awakening possible?

Then it all makes sense.

If the cross becomes the foundation of our spiritual development, if it becomes card zero in our deck of awakening, then the cross is revealed as not being innately foolish.

Rather, it reveals the perspective that understands it as foolish. It's as if you've been watching a movie and you're hearing words spoken, but the speaker is off camera. And then suddenly the camera moves and you see the speaker, and you learn something about why they might be saying what they're saying.

The cross is foolish to those who can never understand standing up not just for justice for yourself, but for justice for all – for blacks in 1950s Montgomery, AL, and for species on the edge of extinction today.

The cross is foolish to all those who can't understand that God doesn't only love the .01%, but that the poor are blessed children of God too.

The cross is foolishness to those who can only see their friends and relatives looking and living and behaving and worshipping exactly like they do.

The cross is foolishness to those who are so self-centered that they could never imagine sacrificing one's life for another.

The cross is foolishness to those who cannot love.

The cross, not as the symbol of physical execution, but as a symbol of the self-emptying of ourselves for the benefit of all of Creation, is not foolishness. It is card zero. It is the first step, not the defeated final step, on our journey towards God, and towards each other. And it is a scary step. It may look like a youth completely oblivious to his surroundings, ignoring the warning yelps of his watch dog, blindly about to step off a cliff.

But it's not.

It is the precondition of The Hermit holding his lamp, and his search for real truth and knowledge.

It is the precondition of Death, the death to all of our understandings of ourselves, and our commitments to conventionalities of our lives so that we can be reborn in the knowledge that we are the children of God by our very nature.

It is the precondition of overcoming The Devil, of overcoming all our addictions and enslavements to our selves, not by something out there, but by all of the dynamics in here.

It is the precondition of The Tower, of the moment when we can fully grasp the emptiness of our hubris in our abilities, and our knowledge, and our wealth, and our success, and our achievement, and see they are nothing but waves on the surface of the ocean of light.

Foolishness is even the precondition to the great purpose of life itself, which is not the evacuation of all of the 'bad' parts of what it means to be human, but of bringing our full selves into balance and harmony and integration: the heavenly and the earthly incarnated together.

The cross is a deep wisdom, which only looks like death and foolishness to those who can only see death. For those who are bathed in the light of love, bathed in the dedication of ourselves to each other and to all of Creation, the cross becomes a way of life, not an end, but a beginning.

Last week we heard a passage from John where Jesus invites those first intrigued proto-disciples to come and see and learn about his ministry. And what did he show them?

He showed them a cross, and he called it card zero.

Amen.