

# IMMERSE

A JOURNAL OF FAITH, LIFE AND YOUTH MINISTRY

## Foolishness!

By: Libbie Patterson

*After 22 years as an administrator and faculty member at Fuller Theological Seminary, Libbie Patterson is a consultant to seminaries and colleges, a speaker/retreat leader, and a spiritual director. She's also an elder in the PC (USA) church and WAS A member of the SoulShaper board for Youth Specialties. In her free time she can be found in the garden, on the golf course, at the opera or playing with kids.*

Media, and popular culture in general, have trouble portraying Christians and Christian belief in any way other than polarized characterizations. I've found that troubling for quite a while, but a recent experience pushed me to ask why once again.

I am an opera lover (don't stop reading... I promise it will be okay!). Recently, in Vienna, I was able to fulfill a dream of attending an opera at the famous Vienna Staatsoper. I saw a production of Tannhauser that fulfilled all my expectations musically but was troubling conceptually. The opera is about sin, redemption, and the power of love. The hero, Tannhauser, sins profoundly. (Going after false gods might be the easiest way to categorize his sin.) His horrified prior colleagues want to kill him, but the woman he loves convinces them that no one is beyond redemption, and he is allowed to join a group of other penitents on a pilgrimage to Rome. There, the other penitents are pardoned, but he is not. The priest tells Tannhauser that his redemption is about as possible as if the priest's dry wood staff were to live again. He returns home in despair, to find the godly young woman who has prayed unceasingly for him dead. But in a last, glorious burst of music, the returning pilgrims sing of a dead wooden staff that has suddenly bloomed. Tannhauser, redeemed, falls dead beside the woman he loves, to meet at Christ's feet in heaven.

The music is transcendent. In the production I saw, however, the stage direction was anything but. He chose to portray the returning pilgrims not as redeemed but as mental patients, ushered onto the stage dressed in hospital gowns and straitjackets, singing gloriously but obviously deranged. The godly young woman loses faith and kills herself, which is not in the

original story. And Tannhauser falls dead with no promise of the redemption that the music tells us he has been granted.

So I have been asking myself, Why? In the face of such stirring and profound music and words, why focus on derangement, cynicism and despair? I can't have a conversation with that stage director to find out what he was thinking. But as I've pondered what might lead to such a hostile interpretation, I suddenly had an "aha" moment that turned the whole question upside down for me. I realized that, however inadvertently the director did so, the staging is in fact profoundly scriptural. Because in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians we read this: "For the message about the cross is foolishness.... God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.... (W)e proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise."

What do you know! Those who appear to the cynical as "mental patients" are in fact filled with the wisdom of God. It is the way God works. Power is turned upside down, the weak are strong, the poor are blessed. I know this is true—deeply true—but when I came face to face with it I didn't, for a while, recognize such a literal picture of how "God's fools" might look to the world. And so now I am pondering again—does my life look foolish? I hope so. We who follow Christ should in fact appear to be unhinged—because we are. We are freed to disconnect from the wisdom of the world, from cynicism and judgment and loss of hope. And surprisingly—or perhaps not so—with this realization came a deep sense of care and concern for that stage director. I've been praying for him ever since.

Thank God for foolishness.