



University Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
Austin, Texas

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Everybody's Fool

I Cor. 1:18-25

Lent 3, b, March 15, 2009

When I was a youngster a highlight of the week was watching the Red Skelton TV show. How many of you can remember that show from the 1950s and 60s? Red Skelton could make you laugh so hard you thought you were going to cry. My favorite character he portrayed was Freddy the Freeloader, an easygoing tramp whose every action seemed to be some kind of reflection on the life he lived or we lived. I know some of you can remember him. Freddy floated through life making light and fun of everyday experiences. And even in the midst of his humor Freddy was able to point out some elements of our more conventional way of living that were & still are, laughable.

Later on when I was introduced to the work of the famous clown, may be the most famous clown in American history, Emmett Kelly, his famous character Weary Willie, resonated so closely with Skelton's Freddie the Freeloader. These comics were able to take a hobo's world and set it alongside our more conventional world to find humor in both.

I take it that young people growing up these days don't always have such a positive view of clowns. In talking with our daughter, Marie, on the telephone earlier this week she said that for her clowns have often been more scary than

funny. Then she mentioned a painting that used to hang on the wall of my mother and father's home in Florida. It had been there since I was a youngster and we always called the clown character that was the subject of the painting Toonie. I have no idea where the name came from. But imagine, if you will, a clown's face in nearly perfect almond shape, made up much like Weary Willie or Freddie the Freeloader, with frazzled hair, lips outlined in white on a dark, stubbly bearded face. And right in the middle of the painting was a big red round clown's nose.

The problem Marie reminded us was that the visage of Toonie had this non-humorous and very upsetting stare right out of the painting into the eyes of the observer. As you walked by Toonie, you had the sense that he was looking at you all the way and, more than that, Toonie was looking through you. The stare of Toonie was so scary that in the generation of my children, all of the grandchildren together had seen to it that Toonie was moved off the wall and everafter hidden in a clothes closet so that they didn't have to face his glare.

Even more shocking to the younger generation, no doubt, is the portrayal of Batman's nemesis the Joker in last year's movie played so villainously by the late Heath Ledger. There we have a truly maniacal, thoroughly destructive and anti-human embodiment. This Joker no longer carried any valence for humor. The Joker doesn't uncover the humorous, connections of life. The Joker shows us how evil evil can be.

So which kind of clown do you see Jesus as being? I think finally we have to come to something like a clowning understanding of Jesus. Either he is:

- As many unbelievers would say, like Batman's Joker, one who was simply, and maybe dangerously, way off the mark, or,
- A tragic & looney legend manufactured by later generations for their own religious purposes, or perhaps Jesus was

- some kind of Freddy the Freeloader or Weary Willie clown subversively uncovering for us the foolishness of our own conventional way of living, or
- perhaps Jesus is for us, like Toonie, a clown whose insistent, inescapable watching of us just makes us very unsettled & uncomfortable.

Whichever way we chose, it is clear that Jesus is everyone's fool, one way or another.

Recall Paul's words if you question this assertion that Jesus is some kind of clown.

18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

19 For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

.....Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?...

25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Paul is teaching us what his hard life experience first taught him, that is, that faithful discipleship to Jesus is going to look like clowning foolishness to the world.

One wonders why he had to even say that. On the face of it anyone who listened to the teaching of Jesus would certainly understand that this fellow made no sense in the world as we know it. What did this Jesus teach?

“Someone hits you on one cheek, offer the other cheek for them to hit.”

“Someone takes your coat, give them your cloak as well.” Not smart. Or,

“A soldier commandeers you into carrying his heavy pack for a mile for them, and Jesus tells you to carry it a second mile!

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Don't you have to be some kind of fool to take that stuff seriously? His teachings are not practical, not reasonable, not sensible... to the outside world. So can you blame the world for believing that this fellow Jesus and his follower Paul who preaches just as loony a message must be living on some other planet than our own?

Indeed, Dr. J.J. Welborn nearly two years ago now published an important scholarly book on the growth of the Christian religion immediately after Jesus' time, argues that Paul, a well educated, traveled, and formerly well-respected Pharisee, eagerly adopts the role of a 'fool', and is bold to announce his own message as 'foolishness' out of the common cultural understanding with his hears of what took place in the theatre of his day. Welborn's study shows that the term "folly" was understood as the attitude and behavior of a particular social type, that is, the lower class buffon, a mime who would prance around during the main play at the theatre, poking fun & poking holes in the main players' pretensions.

In other words, Welborn demonstrated that the Freddie the Freeloader, Weary Willie, Jesus, and Paul, while not always taken seriously by society, have a certain freedom to poke fun at the sacred cows of society; finally, in the case of Jesus and Paul, even to blow the conventional house of cards down.

And this, of course, raises an existential challenge for you and for me, who are familiar with the teachings of Jesus and Paul, but comfortable in the world

around us, and uncomfortable with the notion of being foolish ourselves. The Lutheran philosopher Soren Kierkegaard put it well when he said,

“Christianity has taken a giant stride into the absurd,” and again, “Remove from Christianity its ability to shock and it is altogether destroyed. It then becomes a tiny superficial thing, capable neither of inflicting deep wounds nor of healing them.”

Like Freddie the Freeloader and Weary Willie,
 like Jesus in his contrary to common sense teaching;
 like Paul in his proclamation that the legally executed peasant from
 Nazareth is now the victorious Lord of the Universe,

like them, you and I, need to name which foolishness in the eyes of the world that we will proclaim to our neighbors.

As Kierkegaard wrote in a journal in 1835, “The thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die....”ⁱ

What Truth, what Christian Truth are you ready to stake everything on, even if it makes you a fool in the eyes of the world?

In a few days we will celebrate that life of a man, who like the apostle Paul could answer that question for himself. About 100 years after the Christian Church had finally settled which books would be in the Bible, he was born in Wales to a Romanized family. At the age of 16 he was torn by Irish raiders from the villa of his father, a deacon in the church and minor local official, and carried into slavery in Ireland, where, during six bleak years spent as a herdsman, he returned with a fervor to his Christian faith. Hearing at last in a dream that the ship in which he might escape was ready, he fled from his Irish master and found passage to Britain.

There he nearly starved to death and suffered a second brief captivity before he was finally reunited with his family. A sane man would have stayed home after that.

But St. Patrickⁱⁱ would not settle into conventional Welsh peace. Instead, he listened to calls from God in his dreams. In his short spiritual biography called, *Confessio*, he tells of a dream, after his return to Britain, in which someone named Victoricus delivered him a letter titled “The Voice of the Irish.” As he read it he seemed to hear a host of Irish people pleading with him, pleading for him to come back to the place of his enslavement, back to Ireland. “Deeply moved,” he wrote, “I could read no more.”

Having fled from Ireland a frightened and intimidated young man, he arrived back in Ireland a bold and courageous strong man, now utterly confident in his Lord with great zeal preaching, baptizing and confirming those who responded in faith to his preaching and teaching. As one so audacious Patrick lived in constant danger of martyrdom. No doubt, many thought him and called him a fool, too. But he had made his choice of where and how to serve. As he wrote in his Confession :

3 Therefore, indeed, I cannot keep silent, nor would it be proper, so many favours and graces has the Lord deigned to bestow on me in the land of my captivity. For after chastisement from God, and recognizing him, our way to repay him is to exalt him and confess his wonders before every nation under heaven.

Now, over time the legends surrounding St. Patrick have overtaken the flesh and blood man. But there can be no doubt as Paul took the message of Jesus in

power from Palestine throughout the Gentile Mediterranean to Rome, so Patrick picked up the baton and ran with vigor his leg of the race in bringing Christianity to Ireland. And the Lord blessed his ministry.

I don't know how many of us have had a Damascus Road experience like Paul of being blasted to the ground and having our world turned upside down. I don't know how many of us have had Patrick's call to mission given in a powerful, life path altering dream. But after this morning's scripture lesson in 1st Corinthians, Paul goes on to challenge you and me when he says:

26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards.... But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.... He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption,

Not just on the fringes, but at the very heart of the Gospel, is a foolishness, a divine madness, a cross-like craziness that is intended to overtake and to direct those who would be faithful.

Where is that foolishness calling you to serve?

What is the message that you are to bring?

ⁱ **Kierkegaard, Søren.** "Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Deluxe Edition. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009.

ⁱⁱ **"Patrick, Saint."** Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Deluxe Edition. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009.