

On Being a Fool for Christ
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 Holy Thursday - April 1, 2010
 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

No one knows for certain the exact origins of April Fool's Day, which is celebrated in countries around the world. In some nations, the jokes stop at noon, and in others, the jokes last all day. Some trace the origins of the tradition to Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in 1392, when on this day, the vain rooster Chauntecler is tricked by a fox.¹

Because of the ever-shifting date of the Passover and of Easter, it is not often that Holy Thursday occurs on April Fool's Day. It has not happened for over decade, and it will be over a decade before it happens again. Perhaps, in light of Paul's words in this evening's text, we should celebrate the Lord's Supper every April Fool's day.

In this evening's text, Paul is opening his first letter to the church in Corinth, a church plagued by divisions who Paul would both encourage and chastise later in this epistle. He wastes no time getting to the matter of division within the church, and then he addresses the importance of the gospel, and how the gospel cannot be proclaimed using words of human wisdom, "lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."

Paul continues with our reading for this Holy Thursday, "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. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'" Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

In eight verses, Paul uses the words fool or foolishness five times. I love this reading. It is one of the richest, most densely-packed readings to be found anywhere in Scripture. It is rich in truth, timelessness, and grace. It is also the one Christian scripture all atheists can believe, because it makes it very clear that the Christian message is a foolish message, filled with foolish precepts, written and proclaimed in the lives and language of fools.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April_Fools'_Day

Those seeking ordination in the United Methodist Church, that is, those fools who seek to spend their lives ministering to and with other fools, are subjected to a number of personality and psychological tests as they move into and through the ordination process, presumably to make sure that they (we), while foolish, are not too foolish. One of these tests is known as the Minnesota Multi-phasic Personality Inventory or MMPI. After completing this very long inventory, the candidates sit down with a psychologist who helps them interpret their results.

When Sarah E. Hinlicky was a student at Princeton Theological Seminary, she took this battery of tests, and she writes about it in the August-September 2000 issue of *First Things*, which is a journal of theology. She writes about receiving her results, about how the doctor explained to her that as long as she scored beneath a certain threshold line on the chart bearing the graphic representation of her answers, she was fine.

However, there was one area where she was above that line, in a section called “Bizarre Mentation.” She asked the doctor what this meant, and here is how she reports that portion of their conversation:

“Oh, that,” said the doctor dully, waving it away like a fly with his hand. ‘Don’t worry about it. All religious people score high on that one.’ He went on to explain that if you mark “true” for statements like “I believe there is an afterlife” or “I think angels exist,” the test chalks it up to potential mental illness. I didn’t know whether to be insulted or strangely comforted; either way, the doctor didn’t care and proceeded with the results.”

When I went through this process as a 24 year-old, I remember getting to one of the roughly 560 true-false questions that read, “I believe God speaks to me,” and answering “true.” However, some 300 questions later, when I came across a question which asked, “I am God’s special messenger,” which I not only answered “false,” but I went backwards several hundred questions and changed my answer to the “I believe God speaks to me” question.”

But here is the thing: I do believe God speaks to me. I believe God speaks to you as well. What’s more, I believe that God speaks *through* us as well. Christians believe that the God who created and ordered the universe does foolish things like utilize our human hearts, hands, minds, and voices to accomplish God’s purposes. We believe that prayer is not simply people participating in some sort of unison tribal chant, and we do not believe that we are not simply talking to ourselves. We even are foolish enough to believe that prayer is more than simply talking to an invisible God. We believe that in prayer, God talks back to us.

It is one thing to talk to your friends about being a spiritual person who encounters God in the leaves of the trees and the colors of the sunset. It is one thing to attend church on Sundays and

help out when you can at the food pantry, but when you start talking about how you have moments of intimacy with a personal God guides and interacts with your life, they may not say it, their body language may not indicate it, they may even wish what you have for themselves, or odds are, they think you are a fool.

To believe that the invisible deity who created the world and everything in it deigned to come to earth as a human, as one *of us*, to suffer rejection, betrayal, arrest, crucifixion, death, and burial, and to believe that this is what good news looks like, what *victory* looks like; to believe that the cross can somehow represent triumph, as we do, no wonder the world thinks we are, to use some of the words of this new wave of atheist writing, self-deluded, willfully stupid fools.

Even in Paul's own day was this the case. One of the Gentile religions contemporary with early Christianity was Gnosticism, a faith that eventually adopted Jesus as central to their myths. The Gnostics believed in a God who imparted special *gnosis*, special *knowledge* to those who believed, but they could not and did not believe that God would ever suffer human pain and die a human death. Christians may have thought it was Jesus dying on that cross, but it was really someone else. Jesus was safely in heaven, or so the Gnostics thought.

Yet Paul writes to the Corinthian church about this, and he writes to our generation as well, as he has written to all of the other generations of believers: "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... God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

So many Christians try in so many ways to avoid this simple, Scriptural fact: the gospel message is foolishness to this world. Christians believe that if they can properly influence government and money that the gospel message will seem more believable, and others argue that if we can overcome the objections of science with our own understanding of truth, that the gospel will seem less foolish. Yet the Bible says of itself that this is a foolish message, told in and through the lives of people foolish enough to become entangled in this divine drama.

Indeed, the gospel, this idea that the wisdom of the divine is encapsulated in the life, death, and even resurrection of this one man, who did not look and act like any of the wise of the world expected, is complete and utter foolishness.

Yet, it is a lovely, divine, life-giving, life-changing, beautiful, timeless foolishness, often hidden in unexpected places, and tucked away in the lives and the expressions of unexpected people. It is the foolishness that has been the muse of great art, music, literature, and yes, even great science, as fools in a cornucopia of disciplines throughout the ages have found in this foolish story that which is none other than the wisdom and power of God.

So let us then, as fools together, gather around this table once more, this table we are foolish enough to believe is a foretaste of the feast of heaven. Let us be foolish enough to gather in the real presence of the One foolish enough to face suffering and death on behalf of a foolish, sinful world. Let us be foolish enough to eat his body and drink his blood, and let us be foolish enough to rise from this table, willing to love and serve our neighbors and enemies, until all experience the wisdom, the power, and the holy foolishness, of our great and foolish God.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.