

Holy Fools

Luke 9:28-36

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A Jewish rabbi and a Catholic priest were talking about the perks of their respective positions. The priest mentioned that he gets a rectory to live in that comes with a housekeeper and a cook, all paid for by the church. The rabbi responded by asking if the priest could ever be promoted.

The priest said, "Well, yes, I could be asked to become the archbishop of a larger metro area like Chicago or New York."

"Is that as high as you can go?" asked the rabbi.

The priest replied, "Well, I could be invited to go to Rome to serve as a cardinal, I suppose."

"Is *that* the end of the line?" the rabbi asked.

The priest paused and took stock of the question. He mused, "Well, it's incredibly rare, but I, a humble parish priest, could become the pope, the head of the worldwide Catholic Church."

The rabbi asked yet once more, "And is *that* as high as you can go?"

The priest looked at him indignantly and said, "What are you expecting, for me to become God?"

The rabbi replied, "Well, why not, one of our boys made it" (Joel Kaminsky, "So the rabbi says to the priest," *Christian Century*, Feb. 9, 2022).

"...a cloud came and overshadowed them... Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone" (Luke 9:34-36).

The culmination of the season of epiphany is the moment when Jesus is transfigured in light on a mountaintop and a voice from heaven tears through the darkened clouds, saying, "This is my Son."

How do we talk about such an event? Can we even *imagine* it, let alone talk about it?

Luke tells us that the three disciples who witnessed it "kept silent" in the face of it, "and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen" (Luke 9:36).

And who could blame them? What words can ever adequately describe an encounter with the Holy?

We aren't good at talking about the Holy, because, frankly, we don't have much practice at it. The vast majority of our lives are not spent in the unbridled presence of the Holy God, but right here in the everyday — where people don't glow and faces aren't transfigured and dead heroes of the faith stay dead and no clouds swallow us up and no voices from heaven thunder over us.

We do not live in the unbridled presence of the Holy, but in the everyday, the "business as usual," ... the mundane.

Several years ago, the Methodist Bishop, Will Willimon, told this story:

"In punishment for my sins, my HMO assigned me to a fundamentalist Baptist doctor who subjects me to theological conversation while he examines me. During the poking and prodding he'll say, for example, 'I don't know how you preachers do it — the politics, the congregational complaining, the expectations of the people. I take my hat off to you pastors.'

Though I was not in the best posture for a defense of ministry, I said, 'Speaking of demeaning ways to earn a living — I'm thinking that my worst moment in the parish is not as bad as what you're doing right now.'

Still, he had a point. The pastoral ministry is a tough vocation. Something like 300 Baptist pastors are fired every month. Yet in my experience, most of us pastors aren't interesting enough to get fired. We get depressed. Like the disciples with Jesus, we get 'heavy with sleep' ...our eyes grow heavy, the originating vision becomes blurred, we doze off in mid-conversation, burn out, black out, brown out...

How, in God's name, do we keep at it?" ("Come on down," *Christian Century*, Feb. 10, 2004).

Willimon is speaking to pastors, but I think his point and his question applies to all of us. How do we keep at it?

When days pile on days and our routines become set, it's easy for our lives to become "heavy with sleep." It's easy to slip into auto-pilot. It's easy to put on cruise control. It's easy to just coast.

And when that happens, we go through the motions without much thought, without much intention, and without much purpose. And then we become apathetic, not just at work and at home, but also in the moments when we're supposed to be giving ourselves over to the God. When we put ourselves on cruise control, when we choose to just coast, we can mistake coming to church for worshiping God.

Jesus took his disciples up a mountain. He was forever making them go places with him that nobody much wanted to go. But this was different. Mountains are good, quiet, restorative places for Sabbath rest, for renewal. The pace of his ministry — and the pace he expected his disciples to keep — had been hectic, so they decided to head for the hills.

But if Peter and James and John were hoping to “find themselves” up on the mountain, they were sorely mistaken. They weren’t going to “find themselves.” They were, however, going to find themselves *in the presence of the Holy*.

While Jesus prayed, the three disciples grew “heavy with sleep,” but when they awoke — they awoke to a scene that must have seemed like a strange dream. The appearance of Jesus’ face changed. His clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. And Moses and Elijah stood with him talking about his “departure.”

Peter rubs the sleep from his eyes, pinches himself to make sure he’s actually awake, and then, for a second, he tries to take it all in. The word “holy” means completely other, set apart, distinct and different from everything that is common. Is this what it’s like to watch someone become holy?

Whatever the case, this was worship as good as it gets — the unbridled presence of God bursting onto the scene; Jesus appearing in his glory; the law and the prophets bowing before him; and we fall silent.

Well, most of us would fall silent. But not Peter... Peter blurts out, “Let’s stay here forever! Can’t we go past noon, just this one Sunday!”

God bless him.

Well, that’s what I used to think. I used to think, “Poor Peter, he just can’t help it.” Let me ask you, have you ever met someone who just can’t help but say the exact wrong thing? If ever there was a person infected with “foot-in-mouth” disease it was Peter.

But this time I’m not so sure Peter got it all wrong. Of course, he didn’t get it all right, either. Revelation is a gift, not a possession — so offering to build three shelters so that he could keep this moment going wasn’t exactly the right response.

But, before he said the exact wrong thing, Peter said the exact right thing. He said, “It is good for us to be here.”

I do not know a single person who has ever experienced the presence of God in their lives and did not walk away from that experience saying, “It was good for me to be here.”

What else can we say in the presence of God’s holiness? What other words would be adequate?

Thank God for Peter who, in this moment, gives us the only right words for such moments. Trying to describe a holy moment will only frustrate you. If it is holy, it is completely other — and, thus, we do not have the words for it. All we can adequately say is: “It was good for us to be here.”

You know, in Russian folklore there is an archetype called “the holy fool.” The social historian, Malcolm Gladwell, points out that the holy fool is often thought of as “a social misfit, eccentric, off-putting, sometimes even crazy, who nonetheless has access to the truth...

Every culture has its version of the holy fool. In Hans Christian Anderson’s famous children’s tale, ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes,’ the King walks down the street in what he is told is a magical outfit. No one says a word... except a small boy who says, ‘Look at the king. He’s not wearing anything at all.’ The little boy is a holy fool. The tailors who sold the king his clothes told him the outfit would be invisible to anyone unfit for their jobs. The adults said nothing for fear of being labeled incompetent.” But not the little boy. The little boy didn’t care, so he just blurted out the truth (*Talking to Strangers*, chapter 4, 2019).

I think Peter might just be something of a holy fool. But unlike the little boy in story of the emperor and his new clothes, Peter gets to see the King in his glory and blurts out the only thing that he knows be true: “It is good for us to be here.”

I wonder what those words must have meant to Jesus.

Just before this story in Luke’s gospel, Jesus had pulled his disciples aside and told them for the first time that he must suffer... that he must be rejected... and that he must be killed. When Moses and Elijah appeared with him, the topic of conversation was his “departure” that he would “accomplish” in Jerusalem. They were talking about his death.

What appeared like glory in the eyes of Peter and James and John, might have seemed to Jesus like a dark cloud ready to overshadow him.

I wonder what it must have meant to Jesus to have some holy fool like Peter wake from his nap, rub his eyes in disbelief and say to him, “You couldn’t possibly believe what we see, Jesus, but I can tell you this: It is good for us to be here.”

The truth is that we all need holy fools in our lives. We all need those who point out where the presence of God is at work in our lives.

These days, people don’t glow and faces aren’t transfigured by the presence of God. Dead heroes of the faith stay dead. No clouds swallow us up and no voices from heaven break in on us.

But that doesn't mean that God isn't showing up in our everyday lives. We just don't have the eyes to see it. But holy fools do.

Many of you have met the Spencers and know that they are some of our newest members here at FBC – Bill and Ciara and their two daughters Eliana and Emma. What you may not know is that their youngest daughter, Emma, is obsessed with googly eyes.

When the girls first started attending Sunday School this past summer, the craft room upstairs had a huge bag of googly eyes. Within weeks, Emma had used every last googly eye in the building. I found googly eyes on the floor and on scrap pieces of paper. I have even found googly eyes stuck to the cone at the edge of the parking lot. Sometimes before worship, she would yell, "Pastor Dan!" and run up to me and dump a fistful of googly eyes into my open hand.

Since then, it's become sort of an ongoing joke between us. When the church ran out of googly eyes, a replacement bag showed up at our door courtesy of Ciara. Christen and I made Emma a special Christmas cookie with candy googly eyes stuck all over it. I'd send them photos of where I had found googly eyes in the church. They'd send me photos of where googly eyes had shown up at home.

Then one day, I got a letter in the mail from the Spencers, and inside was the corner torn off of a blue piece of construction paper with googly eyes glued all over it. Emma had given it to me the week before when I was over watching the playoffs with Bill... and I had forgotten to take it home with me when I left.

Inside was a note from Ciara that read, "Emma was really sad you didn't take home her picture so she wanted to mail it to you! [And as we mailed it, Emma] said, 'Isn't it wonderful?'"

Now, that wasn't mailed to me to shame me or guilt me. It was sent to me from the heart of a child who wanted me *to share in her wonder*. "Isn't it wonderful?" she asked.

It was such a small thing. But it came with a big invitation. Could I share in her *wonder*?

That is what holy fools do. They help us to see the wonder in our own lives.

Talking about miracles, St. Augustine once said, "Our Lord's miracle in turning water into wine comes as no surprise to those who know that it is God who did it. At the wedding that day he made wine in the six jars he had had filled with water; *but he does the same thing every year in the vines*. The servants put the water in the jugs, and he turned it into wine. In just the same way the Lord turns into wine water that the clouds drop. Only that does not amaze us, because it happens every year..."

The truth is God is present with us right now – right here in the everyday, right here in the mundane.

These days, you may not glow and your face may not be transfigured during your prayer time. These days, the dead heroes of the faith stay dead, and you have to listen to me preach instead. These days, no clouds swallow us up in worship, and no voices from heaven break in on us.

But that does not mean that God isn't here... right now... in this moment. And the holy fools in our presence know it to be true and can't help but say, "Isn't it wonderful?"

Amen.