

Holy Fools

by Bill Chadwick

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“Holy Fools,” we called ourselves. Knowing we were at least half right.

Our group was made up of a gaggle of junior and senior high kids from our church; an adult advisor or two; and me, the associate pastor. Once a month we donned clown makeup and costumes and visited local children’s hospitals and homes for the elderly. (This was before Stephen King made clowns scary.)

An ancient Christian tradition uses the clown as a symbol for Jesus, for he was the One who shattered all expectations concerning propriety and power. Jesus was “God’s fool.”

The symbol fell out of favor for a few centuries. During that time, the Church concentrated on being dull, dour, and dreary, operating on the deep fear that somewhere, someone might be enjoying herself.

But by the 1970s, things had loosened up a bit—in fact, more than a bit. Sanctuaries everywhere were stuffed to bursting with guitars and balloons in the church’s frantic pursuit of “relevance.” Following the lead of some creative folks, we formed a clowning troupe. With their parents’ help, the teens made their own costumes, sewing outrageous creations and rummaging through their fathers’ wardrobes for goofy ties and crazy shoes, which were not hard to find in the seventies.

The kids designed their own clown faces, starting with a white background and adding designs in red, blue, or green. We learned that “clown law”

requires that each clown face, anywhere it appears in the world, be unique. There's something powerful in that idea. It reflects our belief that God loves and cares for each individual on the planet—"numbers the hairs on our heads," as Jesus put it.

There's something magical about clown makeup, and not just for the audience. Kids who normally trembled if required to simply hand out Sunday bulletins at the sanctuary entrance could, when dressed in silly suits and big red rubber noses, calmly talk and hold hands with patients, three years old or a hundred and three. Adolescent anxieties about acne, popularity, and self-image were rendered temporarily impotent by the persona of a clown. As clowns, the kids didn't have to act "cool." They were unbound from their teenage insecurities and freed for service, a bit like the women and men that Jesus made whole.

Sometimes we led worship services in our own church, but mostly we climbed aboard Big Blue, the church bus, and made house calls. There's something about a whole bus full of clowns—including the driver! With a cargo of colorful clowns, Big Blue never failed to elicit surprised smiles and eager waves, everywhere we went. A simple cruise around the block was in itself a ministry to an often-dreary world.

When we led worship, we did so in mime. But when we visited nursing homes or hospitals, we always talked with people. And especially, we *listened* to people. We didn't really have a lot else we could do. A few magic tricks. A couple of songs. But mostly we didn't attempt to put on a show. We practiced what is often called the "ministry of presence," simply being there with people who might not have a lot of attention being paid to them.

In the Gospels, Jesus performs some flashy miracles: driving demons into pigs, multiplying the loaves and fishes, plucking a coin out of a fish's mouth, giving sight to the blind, even resuscitating the dead. But some of the time, he is simply hanging out.

For example, Luke gives us no details about the conversation Jesus had when he went to lunch at Zacchaeus' house (Luke 19:1-10), but I'm guessing that

when somebody was one-on-one with Jesus, Jesus wasn't primarily teaching; he was listening. The *subject* of the conversation between Jesus and Zacchaeus was probably . . . Zacchaeus! And he came away transformed.

At any rate, we clowns simply tried to carry on this idea, incarnating a little bit of God's love and care in the flesh.

As one might expect, very ill children lying morosely in hospital beds suddenly squealed with delight when a clown peeked around the door. And the sparkle would return to the eyes of weary nursing home residents, when in the presence of a dozen Holy Fools.

One Saturday morning, a dozen of us clowns traipsed into Maple Manor Health Care Center. We did our usual two-minute group "show" at the beginning, then split up and began visiting with the elderly residents. I was in my red-and-white-striped, puffy-sleeved costume, purple patent leather shoes, cardinal-red wig, and makeup. I pulled up a chair at a round table at which two elderly men were seated, having their mid-morning coffee.

I turned to the man on my left. He had a full head of still mostly-dark hair, cut short, gray eyes set in a pleasantly weathered face, and a blue-and-brown plaid shirt. "Good morning," I began brightly.

His lips stretched slightly into the hint of a smile. He nodded, almost imperceptibly.

"You from around here?" I asked.

A pause. His tongue wet his upper lip. He took in a breath and let it out. "Wisconsin," he enunciated quietly, with a tilt of his head toward the east.

"Do you have family?"

"My wife died."

“I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. His tongue worked all around his lips and then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “We never had kids,” he said. “My niece looks after me.”

“Uh-huh.” I nodded. “What kind of work did you do?”

“Farming. Dairy cows mostly.”

“My dad was a dairy farmer,” I said.

He smiled, his gray eyes twinkling.

Pretty normal stuff. Similar to scores of conversations I’d had in nursing homes.

However, during the exchange I had become aware that the man on my right was listening with extreme interest. He was leaning forward, wide-eyed, mouth slightly open, focused like a hunting dog on point.

Finally he couldn’t stand it any longer. Nodding toward the man across the table, he said to me, “In seven years I’ve never once heard that guy speak a word.”

It was my turn to be rendered silent.

Seven years! For a moment I had to bow my head, and I looked down at my silly purple shoes.

Whatever had kept this man behind a wall of self-imposed silence —grief, loneliness, illness—the wall had suddenly melted. Not through the ministrations of a therapist or a physician. Or a pastor.

But simply by being in the presence of a clown, a holy fool.