

## Holy Fools

I Corinthians 1:18-25; 3:18-19a; 4:10 (11-13)

Third Sunday in Lent, (March 7) 2021

Kyle Childress

*Like the jester, Christ defies custom and scorns crowned heads. Like a wandering troubadour he has no place to lay his head. Like the clown in the circus parade, he satirizes existing authority by riding into town replete with regal pageantry when he has no earthly power. Like a minstrel he frequents dinners and parties. At the end he is costumed by his enemies in a mocking caricature of royal paraphernalia. He is crucified amidst sniggers and taunts with a sign over his head that lampoons his laughable claim.*

- Harvey Cox, *Feast of Fools*

*You shall know the truth and the truth will make you odd.*

- Flannery O'Connor

As many of you know, we lost Buckley MacInerney a couple of weeks ago. Since then, many of us have been telling Buckley stories. And there are plenty to tell. Buckley's father was a schoolteacher who taught high school on U.S. military bases in England and Italy, as well as the Philippines for many years while Buckley was growing up, so Buckley had a much more international perspective on world events than most of us who grew up only in the U.S. Buckley spoke Italian and Spanish and in 1964 he joined the newly formed Peace Corps where he became part of the very first class of Peace Corps volunteers and he spent two years in Brazil, where he also learned Portuguese.

Buckley had degrees in physics from the Milwaukee School of Engineering and Stephen F. Austin State University. Dr. John Decker, the late chair of the Physics Dept. here at SFA, once told me that Buckley was the best and most brilliant student he ever taught in physics. Over the years, Buckley was very much involved in the ecology and environmental movement here in East Texas, as well as justice and peace causes. He tried to live in such a way that minimized his carbon footprint, and “reduce, reuse, and recycle” were his bywords. Buckley led the way in creating and organizing our local Farmers’ Market and coordinated it for the first ten years of its existence.

Buckley was brilliant, odd, eccentric, quiet, and one of the most gentle and patient people I’ve ever known. To be with him was to be in the presence of peace. He once told Jane that he sought to practice unconditional love. Many people considered Buckley crazy, a kind of fool in the middle of a world of so-called sanity, realism, and power.

One of Buckley’s long-time friends and a member here at Austin Heights is Jim Lemon. Jim and his wife Kerry live off the grid in a beautiful cabin they built themselves off in the woods. Jim said he knew Buckley for over 40 years and that Buckley was the first person he introduced his then prospective wife to when he brought her to East Texas trying to convince her to marry him. At the time, Buckley was living in a tent built over a platform above the creek out on the family farm. Jim said, “I wanted Kerry to meet Buckley and see that Buckley was crazy. And maybe his craziness would make me look not so crazy and she might agree to marry me.”

I don't know what Kerry thought but I do know that Kerry married Jim and for the past nearly 40 years they have participated in more than their share of crazy, foolish adventures. Many of them right beside Buckley.

Did you know that one of the earliest images of Jesus is a carving from the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century on a wall in a Roman cave showing Christ crucified? Jesus has the head of an ass, the image of the fool. In the eyes of the world, and the eyes of the powerful and successful, much of what Jesus taught and did, was considered crazy, foolish.

Jesus seemed to use a lot of foolishness in his teaching: he told stories of extravagantly wasting seeds in acts of thoughtless, random sowing. An unproductive fig tree is fertilized with piles of manure, and story after story of the Kingdom of God being a party for returning sinners, lost sons, and for street people and outcasts. Jesus said that this is God's Way. This is the Kingdom of God, God's Beloved Community.

A couple of years ago I heard a Fundamentalist and security expert at a conference on church security describe Jesus as naïve because he wouldn't practice violence. By the standards of power and security, Jesus is naïve or irrational. But Jesus demonstrates a different rationality than that of the world. Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, in a kind of parody of imperial power and authority. He was crucified and the testimony of Jesus' followers is that God used the foolishness of the cross to bring salvation and healing reconciliation into this world of so-called wisdom and power.

The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth, a church taken with sophistication in a town full of sophisticates, “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” He goes on, “For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (I Cor. 1:20, 25). Two chapters later he writes, “If you think you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God” (I Cor. 3:18-19a). And then over in chapter 4, Paul adds, “We are fools for the sake of Christ” (I Cor. 4:10).

Therefore, we can see some of the significance of the wall carving in the third century Roman catacomb. This message of a crucified God, coupled with the image of a donkey, was thus seen by most of society as utter foolishness. To bless those who the powerful want to curse, love the unlovable, to receive the outcasts, include the most marginalized, to speak for justice, and to do it with forgiveness, love toward enemies, with suffering service, and to say that this is the Way of God was considered utter nonsense. And to say that God wins by dying on a cross, itself the essence of moronic – the Greek root of which is translated as foolish. This God, this Christ was foolish, moronic. It was crazy. It still is.

But the Apostle Paul says this is our calling. We are called to join with Christ who was considered a fool and for the sake of Christ, we too are to become fools in the same way with Christ.

Back during the Vietnam War Roman Catholic priest Philip Berrigan was arrested for attempting to dig a grave on the lawn of the White House. He said: “We are fools on Christ’s account. In a modest fashion I have sought membership in this company of fools... I have been reckoned a fool by pharaohs and friends

alike...” He went on, “Let no one find our foolishness puzzling... This is the idiot vision – that is the summons and task. For that, as Paul promised, one risks becoming the world’s refuse, the scum of all (I Cor. 4:13) ... Fools will never abandon hope, nor cease to live it” (from William Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience*, p. 112).

Now I know not many are foolish like Philip Berrigan. But I do want you to think about what it might look like to be fools for Christ and to live the foolishness of the cross right here in East Texas. What if we business owners paid our employees a living wage and benefits? Capitalists will think we’re nuts. What if we worked toward producing people who run for office who serve the common good and who believe that politics should not be about power but service? How foolish. Naïve. What if we helped our local police realize that the goal of policing is peace – in the full sense of the word – for our neighborhoods, so that police can once again be known as “peace officers”? Does that sound ridiculous, crazy? What if economic development is about helping our neighbors and not about short-term profits? What if education is about forming good people who can think and who know how to live together in a diverse society, and not simply about passing the standardized test? Might we be called eccentric? Foolish? Maladjusted?

Buckley was eccentric, which literally means he was off-center. But Buckley’s eccentricity was based upon his being deeply centered, yet a center that was counter to our modern, competitive, ambitious world. I would say he was centered in God. His centeredness was holy – a holy eccentric. A holy fool.

Jane, Emily and Callie have a clear memory of Buckley at a party about 15 years ago. It was an outdoor party around Memorial Day weekend. People were

everywhere, with lots of young people, much food and drink, and there was a live band playing. People were talking and laughing, and many were dancing to the music. Off to the edge, on the margin of the crowd, was Buckley. He was by himself, eyes closed, just dancing and grooving to the music.

Off center in the ways of the world because he was deeply centered in the Living God. Buckley lived on the periphery but by his humble living among us showed us that there is another way, a better way.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was accused of being a fool, of being “maladjusted.” Dr. King said, “But I say to you, my friends ... there are certain things in our nation and in the world (about) which I am proud to be maladjusted and which I hope all people [sic] of good-will will be maladjusted ... I say very honestly that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few, leave millions of God’s children smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, and to self-defeating effects of physical violence. I’m ... convinced ... that there is need for a new organization in our world. Dr. King called it “The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment.”

Philip Berrigan called it the “company of fools.” The Apostle Paul called it church. Buckley called it Austin Heights Baptist Church.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,  
Mother of us all. Amen.