

Gary L. Bagley
Hilton Presbyterian Church
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Send in the Clowns
Matthew 21:28-32; 1 Corinthians 1:18-30

Judy Collins was right, you know, in a song recorded some years ago. Sometimes things get so out of joint, so crazy, so foolish that it all seems like a big circus. Life, love, relationships, and even religion—they can all seem so confusing. When everything is falling apart, those words of hers haunt us:

Where are the clowns? There ought to be clowns.

She was right. Sometimes the only ones that can give meaning to the meaninglessness are the comedians.

The more I reflect on the history of Christianity and scripture, the more I am convinced that our faith has been held together at many points by nothing but a bunch of clowns...the most surprising, unexpected, and sometimes foolish-looking individuals God or anybody else could find.

Take, for example, **Noah**. A crazy guy living nowhere near the water building a boat large enough to hold two of every kind of animals plus his family! Could it ever rain enough to make that thing float?

Or **Moses**? A Hebrew murderer with a speech disorder saying to the Egyptian Pharaoh, "Let my people go."

Or how about **David**? A youth with five smooth stones and a sling-shot going out to meet the largest soldier in the most advanced army of the Middle Eastern plains in that day.

And what of **Simon Peter**? Maybe the biggest clown of all. "On" today and "off" tomorrow; confessing in the morning of his faith, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." Then, cursing in the darkness of the night: "I never knew this man."

Yet, Jesus says that it was upon persons like Peter that He would build His church. Jesus put together his disciples—tax collectors, revolutionaries, public sinners—and he led them in associating with the gluttons and winebibbers.

And what about the people Jesus described as being *citizens of the kingdom*? The pure in heart, the merciful, peacemakers, the poor in spirit, the lame, the blind, the deaf, the poor—CLOWNS, all of them. Surely, they are not the stuff of which a church is made. Give us the strapping athletes, the rock stars, the rappers, the successful celebrities in baggy pants and faded jeans. Give us those who are secure and convinced of their vocational task as builders of the church triumphant. But, let the clowns shape up or ship out.

Then, there is the memory of **Saint Francis**, the mad man, giving up his material goods and taking a life of poverty, preaching to the poor in simplicity, living with the leper in humility, claiming that his conversion experience occurred while riding a donkey in a thunderstorm and being hit by lightning.

Or, what about **George Fox**: In and out of prison, beaten and berated for his audacious preaching of the light of God in every human being.

Try to tell **Martin Luther** what a foolish clown he was for challenging the power structure of the church—attacking the very Vicar of Christ, the Pope, himself. “Calm down, Luther, you’ll never win. You’re too introspective, too easily depressed. You’ve got to think more positively and examine the great possibilities before you. You’ve got to get along with the system.” At which he responds, “My conscience is captive to the word of God.... Here I stand, God help me. I can do no other.”

There have been other clowns in more recent history... like **Clarence Jordan**, scorned by locals for starting Koinonia Farms out from Albany, Georgia, helping poor farmhands learn to read and write and be on their own...in the name of Jesus. **Millard Fuller**, a lawyer from Alabama, ultimately found fulfillment through his belief that everyone should have a decent place to live...and devoted his life’s energy to building homes at no profit for those who are willing to invest sweat equity into it and into homes for others...known as *Habitat for Humanity*. **Ben Mathis**, a graduate of Hampden-Sydney and founder of *Rivers of the World*, hopes to make a dent in the medical problems of tribes who live along the rivers of Central and South America and Africa.

Jesus told a strange story about two young men and the father who comes and says to the first, “Go and work today in the vineyard.” And immediately the boy replies: “I’ll go.” He said he would, but he didn’t.

The father goes to the second son and says, "Go work in my vineyard." The son answers: "I don't want to go. Not me. I am not interested in your vineyard." But somewhere along the way he thought better of it, changed his mind, and went out. "Who was obedient?" Jesus asked his listeners. "The second son," they replied. Then comes the wisdom of scripture: "Tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the Kingdom ahead of you. They said 'no' and went their own way, but reconsidered and invested their lives in their father's business. You said 'yes,' but never put your words into actions." (Matthew 21:28-32)

The Church is full of people like these two sons—some who shout from pulpits, some who are pious enough in their Bible studies, or confident enough in their special interest groups, that say, "I'll do that," but never go out to confront the world or deepen their understanding of life and faith. They never seem to doubt, but they never let their faith carry them to the places that make for positive change in the world or in the lives of others.

And the church also has its share of those who at first cry out, "I don't think I am interested. It seems too foolish; it doesn't make sense." But somehow they think better of it and take a chance, discovering the pain and the adventure of the Gospel. They are the clowns.

I talked with a young seminary graduate the other night who had been unfairly banged-up in his student church work and is now headed to a new place of service with enthusiasm and a positive attitude. He's one of the clowns out there.

My former dentist came in his dental room one morning wearing a long sleeve shirt and latex gloves. When I asked him what he'd been doing, he smiled and told me about going to Costa Rica with his daughter, a medical resident in Miami. He was covered in large mosquito bites and was keeping them covered with the gloves and long-sleeved shirt. A retired medical Navy Captain, he beamed with energy as he told me of the experiences he had had on that trip, primarily doing extractions, in the middle of the bush with sparse accommodations and equipment.

We worship a God we can't see. Erect nice buildings with bell towers that point upward. We ask for and support volunteers to go to Philadelphia, Mexico, or our own kitchen and fellowship hall to feed people, provide resources for fresh water, provide sandwiches, or shelter for the night. We give our best energy to a questionable child in the classroom, our best counsel and judgment in the courtroom, our most devoted medical guidance to sometimes ungrateful patients...as we follow the Way of the One who made no distinctions among the people he served and taught.

A few years back while serving as pastor of a church in Tampa, Florida, I received a letter from a woman who regularly watched our services over the NBC affiliate station. She had heard me preach on the Wind of the Spirit. I made reference to a wind chime on loan from a member's gift shop. This woman wanted to know where she could purchase such a wind chime. She was terminally ill and thought the wind chime would remind her of the presence of God. Mary Ann Chastain, a volunteer receptionist, had received the accompanying phone call in the office and took it on her own to purchase the wind chime as a gift to the woman.

Two or three years passed. Then, one day I received a call from the family of this lady. She had died and the family was asking if I would conduct her funeral. She was an ordained minister in her own charismatic denomination. I expressed condolences and agreed.

The arrangements were quite unique. Only a few family members were present for her funeral. Trinkets and pictures were arranged around the casket. There was the wind chime lying in the casket with her. I recounted the phone call and the letter and the passage of scripture that meant so much to her earlier. Weeping and wailing came from those few family members. We left the chapel to make our way to the graveside.

A storm had blown in and a tremendous amount of rain and wind was in the air...fitting for one who loved the "wind of the Spirit." At the end of my brief graveside comments and prayer, the family asked the funeral director to open the casket one last time. He looked at me. I gave a questionable, agreeing, shrug-of-the-shoulders. The rain was coming down almost horizontally. The wind chime, which had been placed in the casket, was taken out one last time to offer

its music. Rain was splattering all over the casket; everyone was getting drenched. I've never seen such a circus in my life as we huddled under this tent with an open casket, rain blowing in on the deceased, and the wind playing the heck out of those chimes. "Oh dear God," I thought, "to what kind of ministry have I been called?"

Never forget that it is by the foolishness of this Jesus that God has chosen to communicate his Good News. You will need to know that when people you have trusted and believed in disappoint you...when you seek to care for others in Christ's name and have that kindness rejected...and when it seems that no matter how much you care, pray, or hope, some people will never get it and never respond. At such times, remember that it is the folly of Jesus' Way to which you have been called to follow.

There is something foolishly challenging about proclaiming hope where there is no hope; about discovering love in a world so full of hate; about calling for peace in a world filled with war; and, about demanding self-denial in a society obsessed with materialism and success.

Suppose that Paul was right, and God really has chosen the weak to confound the wise. Suppose that what seems to be the weakness of God is indeed God's greatest strength. Suppose it works and the world really belongs to the clowns after all.

Years ago, I heard Bill Leonard, now Dean of Wake Forest Divinity School, tell of his childhood days in Texas when during most Januaries his family went to the Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show in Fort Worth. His favorite event was to watch the cowboys ride the bulls, and with the bulls came the clowns in their painted faces and baggy pants. Hiding in open-ended barrels, they jumped around, fell down, and looked absolutely incapable of anything but stupid antics—until a rider flew off a cavorting bull and then the clowns became dead serious in their efforts to protect the defenseless, sometimes hurting rider.

Bill said, “Gradually, it began to dawn on me. The clowns were not just there to be funny or for entertainment. The cowboys and the audience needed them desperately.”¹

Somehow, in the mystery that is God, the world needs us. We look silly in the baggy pants of biblical truths and theology, the painted faces of our practices, and the open-ended barrels of our ethics. But, there we are in the center ring where some people need to be protected, where others are hurting, and where those who have fallen need the safety of a second chance. As foolish as it all sounds, that’s why one person was willing to be executed on a cross in the hopes that the world around him might follow the way of Life.

The cross is now empty. The soldiers are gone and the grave has been sealed. The hawkers and the vendors, the curious and the morbid have gone home. The circus is over. But where in the world are the clowns? There really ought to be clowns.

Don’t worry; they’re still here. And, somehow in the mystery that is only God’s, the clowns are Good News. Amen.

¹ Bill Leonard, in a sermon preached at Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, January 1979.

I Corinthians 1:18-30

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 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. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption,

Matthew 21:28-32

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.