

# Christ and the Clown

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April 10, 2016

## 1 Corinthians 3:18-23

In one of his tall tales, Mark Twain tells how upset and angry he had become about all the discord and violence among God's creatures and how he had decided to take matters into his own hands: "So I built a cage and in it I put a dog and a cat. After a little training I got the dog and cat to the point where they lived peaceably together. Then I introduced a pig, a goat, a kangaroo, some birds and a monkey. And, after a few adjustments, they learned to live in harmony. So encouraged was I by such a success that I added a Catholic, Presbyterian, Jew, Muslim, and a Buddhist, along with a Baptist missionary I captured on the same trip. And in a very short while, there wasn't a single living thing left in the cage."

This story, as we are painfully and sadly aware, continues in too many places and in too many ways – it is more than just a tall tale. Tragic confrontations and violent collisions – religious, political, ideological – continue to destroy human relationships, human communities, human lives – here and throughout the world. Think of the conflict between Christians in our own country: divisions over human sexuality, reproductive rights, guns in church, even budget priorities have made it next to impossible for many Christians to talk to each other or even worship together. Bitter lines drawn in the name of the Prince of Peace.

Now Mark Twain certainly did not intend to trivialize any of this. But, with the sharp edge of humor, I believe he does invite us to take another look at ourselves and our certainties, perhaps not to take ourselves and our ideologies quite so seriously, our beliefs less absolutely, indeed to step back from our grim seriousness and even laugh at ourselves a bit. As one author has suggested, "In today's world, the comic vision has become increasingly difficult to attain but increasingly necessary."

I grew up in Arizona when Barry Goldwater pretty much dominated the political landscape of the state. While I never had much in common with his political views, I always admired his love for the diverse landscapes and people of the state. But another thing I appreciated about him was that, unlike so many of the self-righteous, I-am-right-and-everyone-else-is-wrong politicians of today, Goldwater never lost the ability to laugh at himself. After his crushing defeat in his bid for the presidency, he did not run and hide or go around pointing a finger of blame. In fact, just the opposite. He talked about the campaign and often poked fun at himself. After his return to the Senate, his first speech on the Senate floor consisted of a single sentence: "I feel like a Kamikaze pilot... returned!" He never lost that comic spirit – the spirit that reminded him of his humanity, his finiteness, his fallibility and foolishness.

When Angelo Roncalli was elected pope, taking the name Pope John the 23rd, there were those who took the measure of the man – his rotund body, his peasant features, his humor and pixie smile – and observed: "The Catholic Cardinals have chosen a clown." It was not meant as a compliment, but I wonder. Let's take a closer look at our text for today. Because in a time when people seem so serious, so ready to take offense at anything, ready to crush anyone who dares to disagree with them, Paul provides a rather curious, indeed haunting word: "Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God." Why would Paul, who himself was often quite serious, suggest that we need to be "fools" for Christ?

I find it fascinating that some artists over the years have seen Jesus in the role of the fool – the clown. Should we question their judgment or lack of respect? Well, consider: Here is a man who rides a donkey into Jerusalem on his way to confront both the Roman government and the Jewish religious authorities – a rather comical and clumsy sight at best. Not hard to people unfamiliar with Jesus watching this and saying, "This guy must be some kind of clown." Or here he is pulling an unpopular little tax collector out of a tree and saying, "Come on down, Zacchaeus, I'm having lunch at your house today." That must have seem to others at least a little awkward and comical. And here he is advocating a kind of behavior – turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, forgiving seventy times seven – the sort of behavior everyone knows is only for unrealistic fools... or clowns. Such teaching would probably get him laughed off the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives today. And I don't even want to think what certain presidential candidates would say – "Don't listen to that clown!" And yet, why not Jesus as a clown? Let's think about the clown for just a moment – the one who makes himself foolish on our behalf, who engages in folly that we might become wise.

And the very first thing is this: The clown is a master of make-up and make believe. His costumes are notorious, his face is plastic. She is sober and silly, clever and clumsy, crying one minute and laughing the next. Just about everything human is mixed up in this strange figure. But if we look closely, it is ourselves we see, distorted to be sure, but ourselves still. The artist, George Roualt told of an occasion when he came upon a gypsy wagon and an old clown by the side of a road. Both were decrepit and rather sad. But there was the old clown, mending his costume, which was still bright and scintillating. Said the artist, "I saw clearly that the clown was myself, ourselves, almost all of us... We are all of us clowns, all of us, more or less, wearing a spangled costume."

I think of myself in my robe and stole, the physician in her coat, the scholar buried beneath academic titles, the material things with which we surround ourselves, the certainties by which we love to judge others. What the clown does is to poke fun at all of it, all the things we use to make us feel important, to remind ourselves and the world that we really are somebody. The story is told of the time Will Rogers was invited to the White House to meet President Calvin Coolidge. But even there, the clown in him could not long be put down. When he was introduced to the President, Rogers looked him square in the eye and said, "Sorry, but I didn't catch your name." And the clown keeps asking that. What is your name? Who are you really under all the stuff beneath which you hide?

And didn't Jesus constantly do just that? He challenged the rich young ruler to consider who he was without his property and checkbook balance. He challenged religious leaders to look beyond their titles and rituals to the real problems that real people faced. He dared a crowd filled with self-righteous and murderous rage to reflect on their own shortcomings and weaknesses before judging another. He had a way of reminding us of our finiteness, fallibility and foolishness, and never tired of pointing out that beneath our neighbor's, even our enemy's, spangled costume, is a real person, whose fear and follies are very much like our own and who yearns to love and be loved. Says the clown – and Jesus – never confuse the costume with the person.

And another thing about the clown. If he reminds us how very human we are, he also celebrates our possibilities. The clown has a way of introducing hope into human life. She is the one who insists on riding the bicycle with crazy bent wheels or squeezing into the tiny car when clearly there is no room. It is Charlie Brown going back to the pitching mound each spring even though his team has never won a game, convinced that this will be his year. Clowns trip and fall, often over their own shoelaces, but always pick themselves up and try again. Reflecting on this aspect of the clown, Samuel Miller, former Dean of Harvard Divinity School, said, "The clown lives by his illusions. (Again, Charlie Brown knows this will be the day they finally win!) The clown's dreams pick him up after each dismal collapse. His longings have no limit, his heart is invincible. He begins over again in spite of whatever invisible burden his heart holds. There is a world beyond him, within him, a world of inexhaustible hope, of infinite patience, of undeniable good will."

In a word, the clown keeps reminding us to stay flexible, to remain open to new possibilities in ourselves and in our world; to know, even when life turns against us, that we can pick ourselves up off the ground, learn from, even laugh at our mistakes, and get on into the future. The clown is a reminder that, no matter what, we need not be prisoners of the past.

And again, isn't this the message of Jesus? To the woman caught in adultery, he says, "Go, sin no more, and dare to believe that a new life is possible for you. To Nicodemus, a man tired of the old doctrines and rituals of the past, maybe even just tired of life, Jesus gives assurance that even one such as him can be born again and embrace a new life with new possibilities. To the Samaritan woman at the well, a person with at best a questionable past, Jesus speaks of living water and a new way, assures her that God is not even close to being done with her. Jesus was all about flexibility, forgiveness, the possibility of growth and change, and an eagerness to leave the past behind and move into the future with hope and faith.

I think back to Angel Roncalli, Pope John the 23rd. He was, again, the most human of men. He did look a little funny, laughed a lot, often at himself. Something of a clown... perhaps. But, much like a clown, he was also unwilling to be bound by the wisdom of the world or the petrified traditions of a church. Ever open to the possibility of something new, he changed a church, in many ways changed a world, and the world loved him and has not forgotten him.

And if Jesus of Nazareth had about him some aspects of the clown, it is he, more than any other, who has shown us the face of God, reminded us that we are loved for who we are, and given us hope. It just might be that the wisdom of the world is just foolishness with God. I once heard an Episcopal bishop proclaim, "We need more crazy Christians. The sane ones are killing us! We need people who have found a way to live a different way! Just look at Jesus. He was the incarnation of craziness!" Christ a clown? Could be! So get out there. Put on a big red nose, trip over those shoelaces, find a squirting flower, and dare to be fools for Christ.