

d. AS A CLOWN

Pilgrim Congregational Church, Duluth

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Luke 1:51; 10:21

The New York World's Fair of 1964 featured an exhibit sponsored by the local Council of Churches. Part of the exhibit was a twenty-minute movie called The Parable which aroused considerable controversy. Produced on the grounds of the circus museum at Baraboo, Wisconsin, the film centers about the figure of a clown. Nowhere does the story identify the clown directly with anyone else. There is no dialogue at all and only in an oblique way does the symbolism suggest scenes from the Bible. Nevertheless, among the scores of people to whom I have shown this film, I have never known anyone who did not identify the clown with Jesus almost from the very start. Children and teenagers are especially quick to see this connection. They seem to find it quite natural and almost to take it for granted. Adults make the connection too but with greater puzzlement and sometimes with anger.

Last Sunday I suggested that Jesus had something in common with a hobo. If that seemed a rather shocking idea, the suggestion that he comes as a clown may seem even more outlandish. Yet the thought is not original with me. Modern art and literature are full of associations between Christ and clowns. The clown paintings of Roualt, one of which appears in Elsie Jean's office, are a case in point, though their connection with Christ is not always clear. The clown Christ is not just a modern idea, however. The crucified figure with the head of a donkey first appears in the ancient church. The association between Christ and the professional fool or jester was well established in the Middle Ages. One of the oldest Christian writings, First Corinthians, calls the crucified Christ "the foolishness of God."

What can we make of this strange association between clowns and fools and the one whom Christians call "Lord"?

I don't know that we can make sense of this connection; that is contrary to the whole idea of clowns. They do not make sense. But perhaps we can begin to appreciate the meaning of this strange image by noting that a clown is somebody who does not fit. He acts as if he does fit, walking on stage in a matter of fact way as if he were just like the rest of us. But, of course, he is out of place. We know that as soon as we behold his pasty complexion.

The comic usually has to do with acting as if things did fit when in fact they are quite unfitting. If I were to conduct this service very seriously in a bathing suit, some people would find that rather amusing. The same would be the case were I to wear this pulpit robe in swimming. Of course, there are people who might find me amusing in a bathing suit even on the beach, and there are other people who know me from way back who might consider it uproarious that I should wear a pulpit robe under any conditions. But these unfortunate personal complications need not obscure the point. To do the unfitting in a straightforward, serious way lies at the heart of comedy.

That is the way clowns behave. They don't behave properly like the rest of us. And yet - here is a strange thought - if we want to get paradoxical about it, we could say that their appeal lies in the very fact that they behave more humanly than the rest of us. Emmet Kelly, the famous Ringling Brothers clown, used to walk around with a broom trying to sweep the spotlights off the floor. That tells us something about human nature. So does Don Quixote drawing his sword against the windmill. And so does the clown in the movie called The Parable when he goes around substituting himself for the victims of aggression and exploitation. This is not the way in which people normally behave. It is not fitting. But this strange behavior says something about the possibilities of human compassion.

Now Jesus did not fit either. I think his enemies saw that more quickly than did his friends. The scribes and pharisees saw it right away, which is why they formed a conspiracy to get rid of him. People who break bread with tax collectors, pick corn on the Sabbath and talk about loving your enemies do not fit. And yet if you want to get paradoxical about it, you could say that Jesus was more human than the rest of us. He is God's revelation of what our humanity would be like if we didn't spend most of our time messing it up.

Jesus, like a clown, does not fit. And if we would be his disciples, neither should we. If we take Jesus seriously - and one should always take a clown seriously - we shall find that there are a great many situations in life in business, politics, family, church, recreation where following Jesus does not fit at all.

A second connection between Jesus and the clown lies in the way he turns upside down our ordinary values and our ordinary wisdom. The up-side-down-ness begins with the Christmas story. In an article called The Nativity as Divine Comedy, Conrad Hyers of Beloit College points to the contrast between Jesus' birth and those of other religious heroes. Buddha is born to a queen attended by thousands of maids in waiting. Jesus is born in a stable surrounded by livestock.

In the Middle Ages the church celebrated in many places "The Feast of Fools." This festival began with a reading from the Magnificat:

He has scattered the proud
in the imagination of their hearts
He has put down the mighty
from their thrones
And exalted those of low degree.

Then the bishops and other high clergy threw off their robes and came down from their high places. The lowest members of the churchly totem pole took over. One of these would serve as Pope or King of Fools. They even made fun of the mass. Sausages were used as censors and people brayed like donkeys during the mock services. When things got a little too lively in one French town, the church fathers passed a rule that no more than three buckets of water could be poured over the head of the choir director during vespers.

In this festival the church made fun of its own pomp and circumstance. The usual values placed on people and institutions were turned around. But what the wise understood amid all this foolishness was that a kind of

double-reverse was happening. For the church had begun with the message that the last shall be first, that the leader must be a servant, that the poor shall inherit the earth, that the humble but repentant sinner goes into the kingdom ahead of the straightlaced but proud. Obviously that message had undergone a total reverse in both church and state. There it was power and prestige, wealth and status that counted. Everyone agreed that to run the world in any other way would be foolishness. But once a year for a few days the church performed its double-reverse and let the fools take over.

I sometimes think that Christianity has gone down hill a long way since the Middle Ages.

The great scholar and contemporary of Martin Luther, Desiderius Erasmus, accepted this medieval perspective in his satirical work, In Praise of Folly. He wrote that in order to cure humanity of its folly, Jesus became "in some manner a fool...nor did he work this cure in any other way than by the foolishness of the cross, and a company of fat apostles, not much better, to whom he also carefully recommended folly, but gave 'em caution against wisdom, and drew 'em together by the example of little children, lillies, mustardseed and sparrows, things senseless and inconsiderable, living only by the dictates of nature and without craft or care."

A second way Jesus connects up with the tradition of the clown is by the way he turns the values and the wisdom of the world upside down. Perhaps he comes nearest to our clown traditions when he leaps up in an ecstasy of joy and prays, "I thank thee, Father, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes!" One of the best ways we can share in his joy is to ponder the difference between the values he taught and the lifestyle he lived and what society often takes to be right, proper and reasonable.

A third connection is that the clown suffers. "The clown," said John Chrysostom, the golden-tongued preacher of Antioch, "is he who gets slapped." Enid Welsford in her study of the fool tells us that in the late Middle Ages the French stage fool often portrayed the death of Christ.

Back in 1964 a man I knew saw The Parable at the New York World's Fair. He was totally disgusted at this production being shown at a church exhibit. He found the scene where the clown dies especially distasteful. "After all," he said, "who goes to a church exhibit? It is mostly little children and old ladies."

A year or so later this same man promoted actively a touring passion play sponsored by his Kiwanis Club. Many little children and old ladies were in attendance.

Why this odd inconsistency? In the dying of the clown the violence and vengeance of humanity together with the suffering are real and compelling. In the passion play these realities were lost in sanctimonious posturing.

The clown: foolish, ineffectual, a misfit. He suffers. Like Jesus.

But there is still one more connection. The clown rebounds. There is a rubber ball quality about him. You can shoot him, stomp on him, stuff him into a barrel - but just when you think we have got rid of him for good, he springs back to life. He conquers, but not by power, nor by might, but by an invincible spirit, by the joy that overcomes the world.

Did Jesus come as a clown. Not literally. Not intentionally. There are many features about clowns we would not care to apply to him. Kierkegaard tells a story in which a man runs into the center ring of a circus to tell the crowd that the tent is on fire. What he says is true, but nobody believes the man because he is dressed like a clown. Very few people believed Jesus' warnings either. But it was not because he deliberately looked ridiculous.

We should not carry the clown image of Christ too far. But there is something in that image that can set our minds free from old habits of thinking about Christ. We think of him as that ponderous voice that speaks out of the organ music on "The Greatest Story Ever Told." We think of him as a figure who goes striding around the earth striking people dumb with his supernatural powers. We think of him as a beautiful youth with golden locks and flowing robes, each fold in place. We think of him as an Eagle Scout who gets all his knots right, a quarterback whose passes are all on target.

But here he comes, this Jesus, born in the out-building, riding into town on a donkey's colt, praising the wisdom of children, making friends of harlots, executed under a sign that reads, "The King of the Jews," and then coming back to surprise us with the words:

"O foolish men and slow of heart to believe..."