

What You Treasure...

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Jesus said:

Don't acquire possessions here on earth, where moth or insect eats away and where robbers break in and steal. Instead, gather your nest egg in heaven, where neither moth nor insect eats away and where no robbers break in or steal. As you know, what you treasure is your heart's true measure.

The eye is the body's lamp. It follows that if your eye is clear, your whole body will be flooded with light. If your eye is clouded, your whole body will be shrouded in darkness. If, then, the light within you is darkness, how dark that can be!

No one can be a slave to two masters. No doubt that slave will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and disdain the other. You can't be enslaved to both God and a bank account!
Matthew 6:19-24

We have all heard it said that money cannot buy you happiness.

The rich know that.

The rest of us take it on faith.

Some of us have more faith than others.

In today's section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers some pretty foolish advice:

"Don't acquire possessions....Instead gather your nest egg in heaven."

He says foolish things elsewhere in the gospels.

At one point he says to those would-be followers:

"Sell everything you have, give it to the poor and follow me!"

Once he muses:

“It is easier for a camel to go through an eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.”

It is very likely that these comments, or comments like them, go back to the historical Jesus.

Jesus apparently lived as he taught.

He was a wandering teacher.

He lived off of the generosity of others.

Pretty foolish, really.

There have been many people throughout history who lived that way.

Gandhi lived a life of voluntary poverty.

He had a following of course—a large entourage.

One of his disciples once said that it takes a lot of money to keep Gandhi in poverty.

Francis of Assisi stood naked and preached in the city square after giving up all of his possessions.

During the crusades he marched unarmed across the deserts of Egypt to the talk to the Sultan.

Pretty foolish.

St. Basil the Blessed of Russia lived naked without possessions in Moscow.

At one time during Lent, while the Russians were keeping a vegetarian fast, he presented the Czar, Ivan the Terrible, “...with a slab of raw beef, telling him that there was no reason in his case not to eat meat.

‘Why abstain from meat when you murder men?’”ⁱ he asked.

Pretty foolish to take on Ivan the Terrible.

John Woolman, an 18th century Quaker was a holy fool.

He sold his grocery business because it was too profitable.

He spent his life traveling on foot because he felt the horses were cruelly treated.

He walked around the eastern United States preaching against slavery, excessive wealth, and the mistreatment of Indians.

He would only wear white clothing because the trade in dyes depended upon slave labor.ⁱⁱ

He is a holy fool because he lived as he believed.
He followed the hard sayings of Jesus.

Dorothy Day was another Holy Fool.
She opened a soup kitchen in the Bowery of New York City, and edited a leftist newspaper, *The Catholic Worker*.
She lived what she believed.
She lived her vision. What did she see? She writes:

“I wanted life and I wanted the abundant life. I wanted it for others too. I did not want just the few, the missionary-minded people like the Salvation Army, to be kind to the poor, as the poor. I wanted everyone to be kind. I wanted every home to be open to the lame, the halt and the blind, the way it had been after the San Francisco earthquake. Only then did people really live, really love their brothers. In such love was the abundant life and I did not have the slightest idea how to find it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

She spent her life searching for that abundant life which led her to holy foolishness,
a life of voluntary poverty among the poor.
She lived it as if she were enjoying a banquet.

These holy fools, Jesus, St. Basil, Francis of Assisi, Gandhi, John Woolman, and Dorothy Day are sacraments.

They lived their lives as signs for us of the Divine presence and the Divine possibility.

Not everyone can be a fool.

The Holy Fool can speak the truth because s/he has nothing to lose.
No possessions, no status, no family, no ambitions, only God alone.

I am no fool. I have all of those things.
It is likely that none of you is a fool either.
But we need the fool.

Thanks to these holy fools,
we so-called sane people can get a glimpse of what is truly important.

Sanity isn't all it's cracked up to be.

When psychiatrists declared Adolph Eichmann
(who was responsible for the deaths of millions of Jews during the
Holocaust)

“quite sane” before his trial,
Thomas Merton wrote the following:

*“The sanity of Eichmann is disturbing. We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the **sane** ones who are the most dangerous. It is the sane ones, the well-adapted ones, who can without qualms and without nausea aim the missiles and press the buttons that will initiate the great festival of destruction that they, the sane ones, have prepared....No one suspects the sane, and the sane ones will have perfectly good reasons, logical, well-adjusted reasons, for firing the shot. They will be obeying sane orders that have come sanely down the chain of command.”^{iv}*

The holy fools remind us that the sane conventional wisdom to which we hold and by which we live is not so wise.

They try to make us see that we are chasing after the wrong things.
They try to show us that we are seeking happiness from things that cannot provide it.

They try to show us how to store up treasures in heaven.

The holy fools through the example of their foolish lives—
lives in which they have cast to the winds all conventional wisdom—
teach us if we wish to learn—
where to find our treasure.

By treasuring that which is conventionally ignored or despised,
the holy fools put all of our lives in Divine perspective.

St. Francis kissed the open sores of lepers and ministered to the poorest of the poor.

In so doing, he erased all pretensions to our self-importance based on our possessions or social status.

He saw the Divine revealed in the other than human creatures and he spent his time preaching to the birds.

In so doing, he reminded preachers that most of what we say is for the birds, truth be told.

He also reminded us to evaluate who we are.
Francis reminded humanity to be humble.

Just because we walk upright, use symbolic language, have opposable thumbs, and are anxious about our deaths, does that mean humankind is so much more important than other living beings who share Earth?

In the end, our remains like that of turtles and rats will be eaten by the worms or be converted to fossil fuels for someone's gas tank a million years from now.

The holy fools remind us that the fleshly shell we occupy for this infinitesimal amount of time on the far reaches of a backwoods galaxy on a tiny spinning ball is really not the most important thing in the universe.

The Psalmist writes:

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
The moon and the stars that you have established;
What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?"* (Psalm 8:3-4)

That is right, poet.

We are convertible energy, nothing less...

But are we anything more?

The poet continues:

*“Yet you have made [humankind] a little lower than the gods,
And crowned them with glory and honor.”* (Psalm 8:5)

Poets write these things because they can.

They are conscious human beings.

They are aware.

They are aware of themselves and of others.

They are aware that they don't know very much about why that is so.

Scientists tell me it took between 12 and 20 billion years for me to get here.

I am glad I finally arrived.

I, like you, have been crowned with glory and honor.

I don't know what will happen when my body breathes its last.

I trust that the Universe knows.

Our self-awareness or consciousness (or soul if you prefer),
will have done with it whatever is to be done with it.

Perhaps it will continue on in some form in another realm—

A hidden universe.

Perhaps it will be reborn in another body in this universe—

Perhaps it will enter a dreamless eternal blissful sleep.

It doesn't really matter what I believe.

What will happen will happen whether I believe it or not.

No, I don't know what will happen when my body breathes its last.

But I trust that the Universe knows.

I am finding that I am more at peace and more energized and hopeful when I
allow myself to accept the mystery.

Conventional Christianity is intent upon knowing.

We have creeds and expect people to believe things.

We are told that if we are certain about what we believe we will be happier.

The problem is that many of us are not so certain that what is told us is true.

Believing things because we are supposed to is not satisfying.

It doesn't make us happy or necessarily better people.

Peace, happiness, and contentment come with accepting the ambiguity.

I am finding that I am less interested in believing and more interested in
trusting.

I trust that the Universe will work itself out and me with it.

It has done so for perhaps as many as 20 billion years and it will continue to do so.

The amazing thing is that I am here now—somewhat aware.

There is existence itself.

There is love and humor.

There is kindness and pleasure.

There is good work to be done, stories to tell, dogs to pet,
brides to kiss, books to read, trails to hike,
strangers to be befriend, air to breathe,
lost loved ones to remember, food to share,
and every day the morning sun.

It is the holy fool who brings us back to those treasures.

The holy fool lifts the veils of possessions, politics, and religious creeds so we can see life as it is. And treasure it.

To do that, the Holy Fool through bizarre behavior challenges conventional wisdom.

Conventional wisdom reacts to our anxiety and our desire by providing simple and often simplistic answers.

For instance, conventional wisdom, as Jesus pointed out,
says to love your friends and hate your enemies.

Stay with your tribe. Define your boundaries. Protect your property.
Defend your creed.

Jesus didn't buy it. He said, "Love your enemies."

St. Francis, the holy fool, took Jesus at his word and in the midst of the Crusades,
when the church authorities decided it should capture Jerusalem for
Christianity by force, against the Moslem horde, Francis thought differently.
He traveled unarmed to Egypt to speak with and to make friends with the
Sultan
—to love the enemy.

The Holy Fool flouts convention by breaking our tribal boundaries.

The Holy Fool forces us to see the humanity and the divinity of the other

—whether that other is defined by religion or race or economics or political boundary.

And if the fool can't succeed at that lofty goal at least the fool casts shadows of doubt that those we comfortably call evil are in reality that.

The Holy Fool muddies the waters of our certainty.

The Holy Fool makes us ask ourselves if we are so sure anymore.

At the same time, the Holy Fool removes the veils from our eyes so we can see what is worthy of treasuring.

The holy fools call us to travel lightly and to live light-heartedly.

The holy fools show us the value of all.

Jim Forest, who wrote an article about holy fools in *Parabola* magazine, writes:

“While never harming anyone, the [holy fools] raise their voices against those who lie and cheat and do violence to others, but at the same time they are always ready to embrace these same greedy and ruthless people. They take everyone seriously. No one, absolutely no one, is unimportant.”^v

So...where is the holy fool today?

Who is the fool in our time who can tell us the truth without compromise?

Who is the fool who will show us that our sane logical conventional wisdom may lead to our destruction?

Where is the fool who will make us believe that our way of life is threatening our very home?

What fool is changing our conventional religious belief to a vibrant spiritual awareness?

Where is the fool who can show us how to treasure life and to be at peace in the midst of its sorrows?

Who is the fool who can inspire us with a new vision of humanity—

Of a humanity that is in harmony with Earth?

A humanity that has forgotten how to fight...

A humanity that lives with simplicity and grace...

A humanity that treasures Earth, its beauty, its bounty, and its creatures...

A humanity that is at peace with its own mortality...

A humanity that lives for future generations...
And treats each present moment and each living being as a precious jewel.

Where is the fool who will give us a vision?

Let us awaken that fool so that s/he can make our lives holy.
Amen.

ⁱ Jim Forest, "Holy Foolishness" *Parabola* Winter 1994, pp. 22-8.

ⁱⁱ Sallie McFague *Life Abundant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), p. 188.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

^{iv} Forest, "Holy Foolishness" *Parabola*, p. 28.

^v Forest, p. 26.