Sunday, April 1, 1979
BEING A FOOL FOR CHRIST
I Corinthians 1:25-30, 3:18-23

During the medieval era, there flourished in parts of Europe, a holiday known as the “Feast of Fools.” On that colorful occasion, even ordinarily pious priests and serious townsfolk put on bawdy masks, sang outrageous songs and generally kept everyone awake with revelry and satire.

Minor clerics painted their faces, strutted about in the robes of their superiors and mocked the stately rituals of church and court. Sometimes a Lord of Misrule, a Mock King, or a Boy Bishop was elected to preside over the events. During the Feast of Fools, no custom or convention was immune to ridicule and even the highest officials of the realm could expect to be lampooned.

In our own time, April Fool’s Day, some of the Gridiron dinners, Halloween pranks and the revelry of New Year’s celebration have similar characteristics of the Feast of Fools and perhaps have their roots there as well.

As we would expect, the Feast of Fools was never very popular with the higher ups. It was constantly condemned and criticized. But despite the efforts of those in charge to outlaw the Feast of Fools, it survived until the 16th century. Then in the age of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, it gradually died out.

When carried to its extremes, the Feast of Fools did degenerate into debauchery and lewd buffoonery, and then it was a mistake. But the Feast of Fools demonstrated that a culture could periodically make sport of some of its most sacred and royal and religious practices. It was a reminder that we do sometimes take ourselves and the insti-tutions and systems we create too seriously. There are times when we need to imagine a wholly different kind of world — one where the first is last and the last is first; where fools are kings, and kings our servants. We need in all of our lives festivity and fantasy and just plain fun.

We human beings are by our very nature creatures who not only work and think, but who sing·, dance, pray, tell stories, laugh, and celebrate. Festivity is a universal characteristic in human life. No culture is without it. When festivity disappears from a culture, something universally human is endangered. Then festivity, laughter, play, humor, and celebration disappear, the religion disappears also, and we have forgotten part of the nature of God.

Play, festivity, laughter, celebration are all a part of religious faith. They help us transcend for a time the common everyday events of life. When one is playing, one is on a different time, no longer measured by the standard units of the larger society. In playing or celebrating, or laughter, one steps out of one time into another. We all need the fun and enjoyment and merriment that comes from being a bit foolish. So, on this April Fool’s Day 1979, we want to remember that as Christians there is a right way and a wrong way to be a fool and the Bible speaks of both.

I. First, let’s look at the wrong way of being a fool.

No one of us wants to be thought of as being a fool in the usual sense of the word. Such labels as simpleton, idiot, dumb, know-nothing, stupid, illiterate, oaf, dunce, clod, chump, are

descriptions we do not want attached to us. Neither do we want to be made a fool of in the wrong way, that is we do not want to be used or misused by others.

In both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, there are descriptions of the wrong kind of fool. The Psalms remind us, for example, that “The Fool says in his heart, there is no God.” To trust ultimately in anything else but God is to be the wrong kind of fool.

The book of Proverbs in the Old Testament is filled with descriptions and predictions concerning the wrong kind of fool. “The wise of heart will heed commandments, but a prating fool will come to ruin.... Wise persons layup knowledge, but the babbling of a fool brings ruin near... He or she who conceals hatred has lying lips, and he or she who utters slander is a fool... He or she who troubles the household will inherit wind, and the fool will be the servant to the wise... The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise person listens to advice....

“The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent person ignores an insult...Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge...A fool despises his father instructions, but he or she who heeds admonition is prudent...A stupid son is grief to a father; and the father of a fool has no joy...A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his or her opinion...Better is a poor person who walks in his integrity, than a person who is perverse in speech and is a fool...Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.” A modern adaption of this proverb is, “When you argue with a fool, be sure he or she is not similarly engaged.”

In the New Testament, Jesus also talked about being the wrong kind of fool. He told a story about a rich man whose land produced so much he didn’t know what to do with all that he had. So, he said to himself, “I will do this; I will pull down my barns and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years, take your ease, eat, drink, be merry. But God said to this man,” Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared and stored up--whose will they be? “So is the person who lays up treasure for oneself and is not rich toward God. When God calls us a fool for the way in which we live and for where we put our priorities, then we are the wrong kind of fool.

II. But there is also a right kind of fool. And that’s what we want to; understand and become on this April Fool’s Day. St. Paul talked about being the right kind of fool in his letter to the church at Corinth, included in the New Testament of the Bible. He said, “Let no one deceive himself or herself. If anyone among you think he or she is wise in this age, let that person become a fool that he or she may become wise.” What then are some of the characteristics of being the right kind of fool, a fool for Christ?

1. As St. Paul points out the first characteristic of the right kind of fool is that he or she knows the limitations of one’s knowledge. In other words, the right kind of fool does not take himself or herself too seriously. This kind of fool appreciates the humor in life and in one’s own situation.

2. A second characteristic of being a fool in the right kind of way is to be like a clown. No doubt that’s why at various points in Christian history, Christ has been portrayed as a clown. Tb.is too, has its roots in the Bible.

Like the jester, Christ defied outworn customs and scorned crowned heads. Like a wandering troubadour, he had no place to lay his head. Like the clown in the circus parade, he satirized

existing authority by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey like a king although he had no earthly power and desired none. Like a minstrel he frequented dinners and parties. At the end, he was costumed by his enemies in a caricature of royal paraphernalia, a robe, and a crown of thorns. He was crucified amidst the jeers and taunts of the soldiers with a sign over his head that made fun of his· claim.

In many ways the figure of the clown is appropriate for Christ and for us. The clown represents different things to different people. For some he is the handy scapegoat of our fears and insecurities. We can laugh. at his clumsy failures because they did not happen to us. For others he shows what an absurd clod we human beings are at tim.es and the clown allows us on occasion to admit it. For still others, he reveals to us our stubborn unwillingness to be imprisoned forever within the boundaries of physical laws and social proprieties. The clown symbolizes freedom — the freedom to do and be some of the things we always wanted to do and be but are afraid.

Like Jesus Christ, the clown is often defeated, tricked, humiliated, and tromped upon. He is in this sense a tragic figure and symbolizes for us much of the tragedy we all experience from time to time. The clown is infinitely vulnerable, but never finally defeated.

This past Wednesday March 28, one of the most famous professional clowns in America died — Emmett Kelly, whose sad sack clown figure of “Weary Willie” delighted audiences for half a century. We’ve all felt like “Weary Willie” at times. Kelly was a master at portraying the delicate relationship between comedy and tragedy.

So it is that the clowns in every age remind us of being a fool for Christ in the right way. By learning to laugh as well as to cry, we experience the fullness of life. Christ as the clown can also signify our playful appreciation of the past and our comic refusal to accept the specter of inevitability in the future. As the book of Proverbs puts it — we can laugh at the time to come.

By being a fool for Christ we are not saying that the world is unreal or that life should not be taken seriously. But our Christian faith is saying that we should not take life in this world with ultimate seriousness. We are to be in the world, but not of the world. The world is important, but not ultimately so. Like the clown the person of faith can laugh at the pretense of the prince because the person of faith knows that the prince is a human being like everyone else and will meet the same end as all of us.

And more than that, the person of faith can even laugh at his or her own laughing. We can see the prince and ourselves in a perspective that cuts all of us down to size, but also opens to all new worlds of possibility.

3. A third characteristic of being the right kind of fool — a fool for Christ and like Christ, means that we are open vulnerable persons, not afraid to risk failure, not afraid to risk love, not afraid to give of ourselves, a11 the time knowing that sometimes we will be taken advantage of, sometimes we will be conned, sometimes people will misuse us, but we also know we can never be finally defeated.

That’s why Jesus Christ could say — and it sounds foolish — “You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”

So, on this April Fool's Day, we are reminded that we can be the right kind of fool. We can be like Jesus Christ. We are also reminded that laughter, joy, humor, festivity, are a part of creation. Laughter is hope's last weapon. Be of good cheer, said Jesus, for I have overcome the world!