

Easter for Fools ©
A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein
Sunday April 1, 2018

Roberta: Knock, knock.

Scott: Who's there?

Roberta: Jesus.

Scott: Jesus who?

Roberta: Jesus who died three days ago and now I'm alive again.

Scott: (looks puzzled)

Roberta: April Fools!

It isn't often that April Fools Day falls on a Sunday; which is a good thing as it is a great temptation to ministers. One year, I did the whole service in reverse. I started out in the back of the sanctuary, walked backwards down the aisle during the postlude, blew out the chalice, pronounced the benediction, and even gave the first sentence of the sermon backwards. That was fun. But I couldn't see doing that on Easter Sunday.

How often could April Fool's Day fall on Easter Sunday? And how could I not give in to the temptation to explore the theology of the faithful fool on just such a day as this? Lest you think our opening knock-knock joke was in any way meant to be disrespectful of Christian theology, let me hasten to correct that impression. What I want to argue this morning is that the good news of the resurrection could only be understood by those foolish enough to reject the status quo, to look at the world with eyes undimmed by conventional expectations. Only those foolish enough to believe in something more powerful than empire could hear the news of that long-ago day as 'good news.' So, on this 'foolish' Easter Sunday, let's explore that faithful fool tradition using two contemporary examples. First, the comedian Stephen Colbert. Second, the Faithful Fools Street Ministry founded by UU minister Kay Jorgensen.

Stephen Colbert, as many of you know, is a comedian and late-night TV host. For years he held forth on Comedy Central playing the role of a blow-hard political pundit. A couple years ago he was interviewed by Thomas Rosica, a Catholic media attaché. In a blog post about this hour-long interview, Trevin Wax wrote, “In the interview, Colbert describes his persona on the *Colbert Report* as a “pundit” – someone who is blissfully unaware of important facts, but confident in the rightness of his feelings. Colbert’s created persona acted on whatever he felt to be true. He was a “well-intentioned,” but “poorly informed idiot.” The humor came from Colbert’s willingness to “play the fool” for nine years, to mine the depths of stupidity in search for the unexpected, which evokes laughter. According to Colbert, “idiocy” is when your good intentions and feelings overwhelm your judgment to the point you dismiss facts that might challenge your beliefs. Impervious to reason, Colbert’s alter ego is a fool “because he doesn’t act according to logic, and social norms, and expectations.” Right then, Rosica shifts the conversation to what it means to be a “fool for Christ.” That’s when Colbert defines foolishness for Christ as the willingness “to be wrong in society, or wrong according to our time, but right according to our conscience, as guided by the Holy Spirit.”

That is a deep thought right there. For Colbert, a devout and very thoughtful Catholic, to go against the accepted wisdom of the world is to choose for Christ. Christ represents, for him, that which is of ultimate worth. Each of us, as devout and thoughtful Unitarian Universalists, needs to define what is of ultimate worth for us. God, nature, humanity, the greater good. For us, the choices are limitless, but something must occupy that place of ultimate worth. There must be something that each of us chooses for. Something that we will be a fool for, something for which we will take the risk of being wrong in society, wrong in our time, but right according to our conscience. Our conscience, but, and this is a big but, not as an

isolated individual, but as an individual in relationship with others, all in agreement that we are guided by something greater than ourselves.

The Unitarian thread of our faith asserts the oneness of the divine. In my Christian seminary, I learned all about the doctrine of the trinity. And I learned, to my surprise, that many thoughtful Christian theologians think of us Unitarian Universalists as being devotees of the third person of the trinity: the holy spirit. We have rejected out of hand the patriarchal, authoritarian Father. We insist on the complete humanity of the Son. But we seem to be comfortable with many diverse and often vague references to something like the holy spirit: the spirit of life and love, the spirit of nature, the spirit of creation.

So, for us to be faithful fools, we need to risk being wrong in the eyes of the world to attend to the promptings of that undefinable spirit that moves in us and among us and between us. Knock, knock. Who's there? Ummm, not sure. But we know things are not as they should be, and it looks like it is up to us to do something about it. Let's get together and get to work.

In that spirit let me introduce you to a bunch of contemporary fools. The Faithful Fools Street Ministry, founded by Unitarian Universalist minister Kay Jorgenson. Their mission statement says, "We are called to a ministry of presence that acknowledges each human's incredible worth. Aware of our judgments, we seek to meet people where they are, through the arts, education, advocacy, and accompaniment. We participate in shattering myths about those living in poverty, seeing the light of courage, intelligence, strength, and creativity of the people we encounter. We discover on the streets our common humanity through which celebration, community, and healing occur." Based in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco, the Faithful Fools provide direct services and assistance to people living on the streets, as well as accompanying them through the maze of services to which they are entitled. They also engage in advocacy on behalf of the people in

their community. Volunteers are required to participate in street retreats, a full day of walking the streets of the Tenderloin seeking wisdom. “We believe that when we walk the streets, the life around us is a mirror, reflecting back to us our humanity, our frailties and our strengths. When we look with compassion upon others, we find compassion within ourselves, for ourselves & for others; When we acknowledge the strengths of those around us, we acknowledge the incredible worth of all of us.” After at least one street retreat, volunteers must participate in ongoing meditation and reflection groups. They are constantly reminded that they are not there to help, they are there to engage.

For several decades, the Faithful Fools have shared life and hope with some of the most invisible people in our nation. Poor street people. The people we pass by on the other side. The people we judge for their foolishness: why give them money, they’ll just spend it on cigarettes and booze! The Faithful Fools, through their program of immersion and engagement, have found themselves profoundly transformed by their experiences. Their world looks different to those who have truly experienced the worth of all of us. Something happens to the fools who take their street retreats seriously. And that is what this Easter Sunday on April Fools Day is all about. It is about something happening. Over and over again.

Approximately two thousand years ago, something happened. A man who may or may not have been more than a man was put to death by an empire which was exactly what it was: a machine of death and power and intimidation and fear whose entire purpose was to protect the wealthy and powerful from everybody else. For the empire, death is always a victory. To follow a man who preached love and radical hospitality, a man whose enigmatic stories turned wisdom upside down, a man who centered marginalized voices and consistently chose life and love over power and fear . . . well, they must have been a bunch of darned fools. Darned fools who experienced something on that long-ago Easter morning.

Something we will never know for sure or agree about. What we do know is that they were transformed by their experience, and they in turn transformed the world. Maybe Jesus fooled death. For sure he fooled the corrupt power of the empire. Maybe his disciples were fooled. For sure they had the last laugh.

That is the moral of the Easter story: death never has the last laugh. Love does. Corrupt power never has the last laugh. Justice does. Something happened in those ancient stories. Something happened at the Red Sea; the fleeing slaves had the last laugh over Pharaoh's army. Something happened at the tomb; the rag tag disciples had the last laugh over the Roman Empire. There will always be wealth, there will always be empires, there will always be corruption and intimidation and fear and death. And there will always be the possibility of a bunch of fools making something happen. Knock, knock. Who's there? (Shrug) Hallelujah!