

Faithful Fools

Jamaica Plain, January 23, 2005, Rev. Terry Burke

Six years ago, on January 24th, my father Jack Burke died. He was a good-hearted, warm and whimsical person, and his death was a real "continental shift" in my life. Afterwards, I thought a great deal about his life and the possible significance of the date of his death. Just this week I learned that January 24th is the date for the Jewish New Year for Trees, significant in Jewish mysticism.

Some months after my father's death, I learned that January 24th was the feast of the Russian Saint Ksenia. Ksenia was a young 18th century St. Petersburg aristocrat whose army officer husband died suddenly at a party. Ksenia then withdrew from her former life and started giving away her wealth. Concerned that she was insane, her relatives dragged her into court. The judge ruled that she was completely sane and could do what she wanted with her money. Eventually Ksenia lived as a homeless person in a St. Petersburg cemetery. During the day, she would help poor families who lived nearby. The story goes that if a mother left her sick children in Ksenia's care in order to run errands, when she returned, the children would be well.

Saint Ksenia is an example of what in Russian is known as a yurodivyi, or holy fool. The most famous holy fool is Basil the Blessed, for whom the famous St. Basil's Cathedral in the Moscow Kremlin is named. In the 16th century, the emperor Ivan the 4th, known as "the Terrible," had his secret police kill at will, ordering the head of the Russian church strangled for criticizing the czar. Ivan was terrified of the holy fool Basil, who walked about naked in the Russian winter. In some Western Medieval monarchies, the jester or fool could tell the sovereign the truth. Likewise, Basil once handed Ivan a hunk of bloody, raw meat, making clear that the ruler had blood on his hands.

The yurodivyi was a fool for God, acting as a fool because the world had treated Jesus as a fool during his life. A 19th century Russian wrote of visiting a provincial town and

spotting a former university classmate on the steps of the local church. The former classmate was dressed in rags with a crazed and idiotic look on his face. He walked up to the visitor and as he approached him he resumed his former demeanor, saying quite sanely, "How wonderful to see you. May God bless you!" Then he resumed his mask of insanity and disappeared into a crowd.

In a contemporary Unitarian Universalist context, we have the foolish street ministry of the Faithful Fools in San Francisco. Faithful Fools was founded in the late 1990's by two women, Rev. Kay Jorgensen, a UU minister affiliated with the First Unitarian Church of San Francisco and Sister Carmen Barsody, a Franciscan nun. Foolishly extolling the worth of all people, the Faithful Fools combine advocacy, child care, work and arts programs for the poor. They are especially noted for their "Street Retreats," in which middle class people spend several days with the poor on the Tenderloin streets of San Francisco. Former First Church Jamaica Plain Affiliate Minister Parisa Parsa, now serving the First Parish in Milton, recently returned from a Fools retreat in Nicaragua, (where Sister Carmen Barsody had previously worked), making connections between North American poverty and the poor of Latin America.

In our reading today about pennies, Rev. Kay Jorgensen tells of being told by a stranger to pick up two cents lying on the sidewalk. Going into a grocery store, she then encounters a man who needs two cents to buy a drink. She gives him the two cents she'd found and concludes, "We have what is needed before it is asked of us." Or as our own Emerson Stamps puts it, "Everything we need is right here." I have a colleague who saves the pennies she picks up off the street, sending a check for the amount to Faithful Fools on April Fools' Day. What seems of least value can foolishly have an infinite value.

I recently heard a foolish story from a multicultural setting. The New England Director of Church World Service, a relief organization, was given an award this week at the Mass. Council of Churches' annual meeting. William Wildey told how as a young man he had been sent to Africa, to northern Ghana for three months. It was his first time outside of the U.S. A family in the countryside invited him to visit them for the day. He spent a very

pleasant time of 3-4 hours with them. As Wildey left, the father of the family said, 'I have a gift for you.' Now, the family was not materially very well off. At first, the American tried to refuse, but then it became clear that he had to receive the gift, which was a basket with 13 eggs in it. Walking back to his quarters, he met his supervisor. "How was your visit?" "Great. They are wonderful people." "Did they give you a gift?" "Yes." "What was it?" "A basket with 13 eggs." The supervisor paused, "They've given you all their food for today, but...don't feel guilty!" "No late," was the reply. What wonderfully foolish gratitude the African family had expressed for his friendship.

Unitarian Universalists often stress the importance of reason in religion. Once when I labeled myself as a UU, a man I'd just met commented, "Oh yes, Unitarian Universalists believe in salvation by academic degrees." Sometimes we just have to do something foolish, like come to church on a snowy day, or invite our friends from First Baptist to worship in our building. Unitarian William Ellery Channing foolishly believed in the basic goodness of humans as created in God's image. Universalist John Murray foolishly believed that God's love was for all people. Theodore Parker (Unitarian) foolishly worked to abolish slavery. Henry David Thoreau (Unitarian) foolishly engaged in civil disobedience to our war against Mexico. Olympia Brown (Universalist) foolishly thought women should be ordained to the ministry. Nobel Peace Laureate Emily Greene Balch (Unitarian), who grew up in our church, foolishly thought people could live in peace. Rev. James Reeb (Unitarian Universalist) foolishly believed in Civil Rights for all people, and was murdered in Selma. Several UU couples as Massachusetts plaintiffs foolishly believed that two men or two women should be allowed to legally marry.

How can we, in our time and in our city, foolishly risk putting all our eggs in one basket? What are the pennies of infinite worth for us to pick up right now, the words of foolish truth to speak? How are we called as a congregation to foolishly follow the words of the prophet Micah to "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God?"

