

Lent 4 Year A 2011

In many cultures of the world, the first day of April is kept as April Fools' Day. As we know it a day for shenanigans, generalized tomfoolery, and practical jokes played on our unsuspecting family members, friends, and co-workers. Most of us have been at one time or another the butt of someone's silly pranks on this day, perhaps even as recently as this past Friday, and hopefully we've taken it in stride – even giving as good as we got – all in good fun. So how many of you were in on an April fool's joke on Friday?

It seems somehow appropriate that at least one day a year should serve to remind us not to take ourselves too seriously. After all, many people in today's busy world assume the duties and responsibilities of work and family life with a grim determination that seems to leave little room for humor or amusement. What better remedy than a day that dares to poke fun at our self-importance and pretensions?

Oddly, no one is quite sure of the origin of April Fools' Day, although many theories abound, and in some places it's called All Fools' Day. In the English-speaking world, the day and its foolishness are attested at least as far back as Chaucer's time in the fourteenth century. But similar customs are found throughout the world. April Fools' Day has not yet made it into the calendar of the church year, though – bearing in mind the current "whole state of Christ's Church and the world" – its time may be coming. And it is not for nothing that St. Paul unabashedly calls us "fools for Christ."

In fact, rank foolishness in religious matters goes back at least as far as Hebrew times. Consider our reading today from First Samuel, a work that, among other things, recounts the

history of kingship in ancient Israel. The Lord sends the prophet Samuel in search of a new king – even though Saul is still very much alive and on the throne. Samuel must surely have thought the Lord was joking, and pulling a fast one on him. Perhaps he even checked his calendar to assure himself that it was not the first of April. “How can I go?” he asks with trepidation. “If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.” And alas, as it turns out, the Lord is not joking. So off Samuel goes on his implausible search for a new king.

The story and its improbability – call it foolishness if you like – does not end there. Intent on his mission from the Lord, Samuel gets up close and personal with all of Jesse’s fine sons, each in turn passing before his inspection. Any one of them might have made an excellent king for the Lord’s people. Any one of them, that is, except for the youngest, David, whom their father does not even bother to bring before Samuel’s gaze. Too young, Jesse must have thought, too inexperienced and unschooled in the ways of the world, too much dirt under his fingernails. Yet, foolish and silly as it may seem, it is precisely David who is to be king. “Rise and anoint him,” says the Lord without cracking a smile, “This is the one.” No fooling.

It seems our human judgment is all too often and hastily blind to the wisdom of the Lord masquerading at times as human folly. Perhaps we all need to become more mindful of the Lord’s “foolish” ways if we ourselves want to be truly wise.

That seems to be the lesson of today’s gospel account – the story of the man born blind and his healing. But his healing and the return of his sight is not the only wonder in the story. More astonishing still is the inability of the blind man’s neighbors and the Pharisees to recognize the hand of the Lord at work in their

very midst. Like a first-century version of that television show Dr. House and his team of medical specialists as they attempt again and again to diagnose the undiagnosable. Have you watched this television show House? Each episode is a medical investigation as this team of diagnostic specialists goes over every possibility and contingency searching for the cure. They would visit family and neighbors. They would consider each detail of the blind man's history, symptoms, and healing. Perhaps he was not really blind to begin with, they speculate. Perhaps on the other hand he was "born entirely in sins." Maybe the return of his sight had something to do with the mud in his eyes or the waters of Siloam in which he bathed. Or maybe not. But what they refuse to see is the obvious: the plain truth of the Lord's gracious goodness at work in the lives of his people – specifically in the life of this blind man who asks nothing of Jesus but is nevertheless and seemingly without any cause, one might even say foolishly, given his sightsimply "so that God's works might be revealed in him." No questions asked. No demands made. No hidden agenda. Then as now, it seems the Lord loves to astonish us with his "silly" and extravagant ways.

The tragedies and trials of today's world are of course not funny and no one would suggest otherwise. Yet even in the midst of great human hardship, the Lord never stops smiling upon us with the "goodness and mercy" of which our Psalm today speaks. Whether manifest in the unlikely flowering of democracy in ancient lands or in the small and unexpected miracles of heroism and rescues found in the midst of immense natural disasters, the Lord's benevolence and love remain as strong and certain as ever.

In some circles of religion, today the Fourth Sunday of Lent is known as Laetare Sunday, a Latin liturgical term that means, "Be joyful." We might find it odd that, in the middle of our Lenten rigor, we should be encouraged to somehow rejoice. Yet the lesson is clear for Christians, because there is always time and reason to be glad. And to smile.

The Lord has not lost his sense of the miraculous in human life. He has not lost his sense of humor. And so neither should we. Perhaps the message for the day is to lighten up a little. "Sleeper, awake!" thunders the author of Ephesians in our second reading today. Was his desire to jolt his hearers from mirthless complacency and sluggishness? "Rise from the dead," he demands, "and Christ will shine on you."

There are many many miracles happening in our world and in our lives to which we may be sound asleep. And perhaps the only thing standing in the way of awakening to these miracles is our willingness to see in the way that God wants us to see. And it would seem according to our Gospel story that admitting we are blind is the key to allowing God to open our eyes. The Pharisees will not admit their blindness and therefore they remain blind and their sight is muddied to the miraculous nature of Jesus. But if we admit our blindness we invite God to open our eyes. God sends us to wash the mud from our eyes like Jesus sent the blind man into the waters of Siloam. And my guess is that when that happens the miraculous will come pouring in. And we might even wonder why we never saw it sooner. Amen

Excerpts taken from The Rev. Dr. Frank Hegedus, the newly appointed chaplain of St Margaret's Anglican Mission, in Budapest, Hungary.