

A Foolish God in the Intellectual Age

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
January 22, 2023 by Torrin Maag

When Dave invited me to offer a reflection on young adult ministry, I immediately did the obvious thing: Put up an icon of a mostly naked man and work from there.

This man is St-Vasiliy of Moscow, better known in English as St-Basil, a miracle-worker and preacher from the age of Ivan the Terrible. The namesake of the famous St-Basil Cathedral in Moscow's Red Square, Basil is an example of a "Holy Fool." The idea of Holy Fools is a very particular oddity of Russian Orthodox Christianity. These "Fools for Christ's Sake" follow Paul's call to foolishness literally, choosing to live totally outside of normal, polite society. Sometimes acting, sometimes being, they would live absurd lives to demonstrate humility and to serve God. Basil, for example, took the novel theological approach of shoplifting to give to the poor and needy, especially to those too ashamed to ask for help. His nudity and foolishness were tools of God's love, to rebuke an uncaring polite society.

Though Holy Fools are a Russian Orthodox tradition, the general concept of holy foolishness exists consistently across Christian history. For example, the great St-Francis of Assisi was a confirmed weirdo! After a long series of divine revelations, Francis allegedly interrupted a church service by stripping naked from his fine clothes as a visible rejection of his father's wealth. Having so scandalized the town, he then ran away and lived in the woods, preaching and singing to the animals. His life was a series of burst of energy and total melancholy. He once walked to Egypt in a religious fervor to attempt to convert the sultan and end the fifth crusade; yet other times, he would hole himself in his monastic cell and refuse to speak to anyone for weeks. St-Francis' life was a series of ever greater rejections of normalcy *for the sake* of the kingdom of God.

Christians have always understood foolishness as revealing Christ. We are traditionally a faith-insane. Yet, this concept feels foreign to me. Intellect and wisdom have always been upheld as among the most important Christian virtues in my life.

You might be asking some very reasonable questions right now, like: What does this have to do with young adult ministry? And, does Torrin think the secret to faith is stripping naked?

The answer to that second question is a *firm no*. Please keep your clothes on, in church, at least. The answer to the first is the rest of this sermon. For now though, I simply want to raise that the church, from Paul to Francis to Basil, has always held up foolishness as being equal in holiness to wisdom.

Let me rewind back to our topic: young adult ministry. Ever since I was little, I remember hearing: "Where are the young people? Where are the young families?"

These questions show an interesting assumption. They're phrased like we've lost the young people, like they're dishes we put back in the wrong drawer. If we could just find the young and show them the open door, then they would naturally come in and slot cleanly into the church, just like they always have. {Read this staccato.} But do we really believe that? Let's do a thought experiment. Imagine I kidnapped 25 young adults, every Sunday, and plonked them into church. How many do we think would come back the next week? How many would still be here a year from now? My bet: less than three.

I've done this before, smaller scale. I've gotten friends of mine into pews, but they don't stay long.

Some people claim that the problem is outdated beliefs. "The church is being pushed to social irrelevance," they say. "If we want young, secular people to join our church, we need to match their social and political beliefs. That is how we will remain relevant to modern society."

And there's wisdom there. The church has cut people off from God's love with its imperious attitude that "we know better." It has struck them across the cheek; it has whipped them into conformity. It still does; the dangerous and idolatrous rise of Christian Nationalism in America testifies that these times are not simply past.

These wounds metastasize. Violence infects the whole people, weakens it, traumatizes it. To injure one is to injure the whole, the wounds of the individual mirrored and multiplied across the collective. And so, people learn to fear the church.

Blessed are the persecuted, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the wounded, the imprisoned, the exiled, for Christ suffers among them.

It might be easy to hide behind being "the good Christians" who would "never do something like that." But we cannot take this stance, for we are the Body of Christ, wholly unified. So when Christians wound another, we are responsible for mending the wounds. We might not have been the executioner; we might confess that action as monstrous; but still, the blood sticks to our fingers.

So. Changing attitudes and beliefs is important. But not as some marketing ploy; people see right through that. The church's decision to honestly stand in solidarity with the oppressed, the marginalized—and in doing so, *in fact* becoming oppressed and marginalized—will come from the bloody fact of the cross, of love's incarnate suffering. It will not come from the desire for popularity. Which is good because that approach has clearly failed to bring people into the United Church. We are denominationally progressive—more so than secular culture—but despite our beliefs being attuned to contemporary issues, people are not flocking to join the church. When Emily or I speak to people about religion, what we often hear is: "I'm really glad there's Christians like you." But it's never followed up with: "Cool, when's your Sunday service?"

Being the atheists' favourite church is a cardboard crown. They might applaud our views and good works, but that knowledge won't get them step through the door. And maybe we shouldn't expect them to. We can take down all the barriers to entry, but an open door does not naturally draw people in. There needs to be the call.

So maybe we've got the question wrong. Instead of asking: "How do we get young people into church?", we should ask "How can we meet the needs of young people? How are young people called to follow Christ?"

These questions are much more difficult to face because they require us to step away from our own desires. Attending Sunday morning services might be the call for some people, but it won't be for most people. And if they do, the expectation cannot be that they will slot neatly into pre-existing structures. A generation without significant prior experience in the church, raised in a post-Christian world, will have significantly different spiritual needs. But I can tell you, the need is intense. Loneliness, hopelessness, and meaninglessness are epidemic across young adults. As Canada has become increasingly isolated and individualistic, we have lost a sense of interconnected

personhood. Political radicalization has benefited from these trends, leading to a divided and unhealthy body politic. Material struggles and a high cost of living has made millennials the poorest generation since the Great Depression. Without strong community bonds, there are few people to turn to when facing even ordinary challenges.

Beyond that, I have truly seen a great spiritual need among the people around me. I have had many conversations with young adults curious about Christianity, who would want to learn more and form a stronger connection to God and to faith, both people born in the church and those without a pre-existing Christianity. The rise of new religious and spiritual practices testifies to the missing sense of grace.

Hearing this need, one might conclude that “of course young adults need church! They have spiritual needs; that’s church’s whole deal.” But I don’t think it’s so simple. Again, I have had very little success bringing young people to church. And I think that makes sense. Church naturally isn’t an accessible space for non-believers. That’s not its role. Church services are communities of believers worshiping God together. They are meant to be communal ritual, not an entry point. The ritual gets its power from tradition and design, repeated across a lifetime. But for a newcomer, church is a complex and confusing ritual. It is not an entry point.

First experiencing Christianity as a confusing and anxious social experience is not the best way to address these spiritual issues. So, what do we do instead?

As always, let us return to the gospel. There are in fact a lot of similarities between first-century Judea and today. These were both times of confusion and change, where traditional faith was trying to find its place in a new and unsettled world. When Jesus came by Simon and Andrew, James and John, he did not convince them, did not rest on their understanding. He simply said: “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” Their faith had no content; they did not know Jesus’ nature, they were not taught trinitarian theology, they did not “accept Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour” as the old evangelical saying goes. They simply heard the call of God and answered, without knowing where their path might lead.

Relationship is the beginning of faith. All we do here is try to bring ourselves and our communities into right relationship with God and with our neighbours. If we have that core, we can do church in many ways.

The young philosopher Martin Buber once claimed that youth was the age when each generation rediscovers God. By bringing ancient wisdom in conversation with a new world, they breath life back into the old traditions, transforming them and being transformed by them. They enter relationship with God by journeying outside of the community of their youth. They experiment and explore and listen for the call of Christ.

Basil was not inspired to Sainthood by some intellectual matching of his belief. Call requires an outside-ness, a dialogue. An intellectual faith cannot allow for the demand, for the absurdity, the foolishness of God.

We live in an intellectual age, where all life is reduced to reason. But we are not intellectual beings. We are physical, emotional, spiritual creatures. We are created first to love; not to think. Against the wisdom of the age, we raise a foolish God, one who reveals Themselves only in relationship.