

Traveling Companion: You could have fooled me

Fr. Michael Tracey

Sometimes, when priests get together and talk about pastors from yesteryears, there is a certain sadness in their voices. They lament the passing of the “characters.” They were priests who danced to their own tunes, often to tunes in conflict with their bishops. In a good sense, they were eccentric. They were “different.” Many of them didn’t “fit in.”

We live in a world that expects sameness and doesn’t treasure differences. We are expected to “fit in.” Being “out of step” is not tolerated. We expect people to fit a “frame” we have created for them. We expect them to think inside the “box,” usually a “box” we create for them. If they “think outside the box,” we stuff them in again because we have a hard time with diversity and eccentricity. Worse still, if we have a hard time accepting their uniqueness and eccentricities, we label them as “mentally unbalanced,” as not being “normal,” as being “different.” Sometimes, we lock them away, making sure that they do not contaminate the “normal” people of society.

Today is April 1st and we celebrate “April’s Fool. The origin of April Fool's Day remains clouded in obscurity. Basically no one knows exactly where, when, or why the celebration began. What we do know is that references to 'All Fool's Day' began to appear in Europe during the late Middle Ages. All Fool's Day was a folk celebration. But what is clear is that the tradition of a day devoted to foolery had ancient roots. As we look back in time we find many ancient predecessors of April Fool's Day. Northern Europeans observed an ancient festival to honor Lud, a Celtic god of humor. And there were also popular Northern European customs that made sport of the hierarchy of the Druids.

Years ago, I remember reading a book by John Powers where he listed a series of “Tips for a laughable life.” These included: listen to people who live on the edge, they know more about the center than do the higher-ups. Challenge all those who pretend to be perfect. Learn how to do subtraction. It will bring more happiness into your life than addiction. Reverence the imagination but not always the content of fantasy. Repeat jokes even when you don’t find them funny anymore. Others might. Remain suspicious of bureaucracies. They store ideas well but don’t create them. People do. Never walk by a playground without trying a swing, slide or seesaw. Have breakfast with someone dangerous or different just to scramble your ideas. Give something away every day. That way you won’t have to worry about taking it with you. Heaven is a kinship of fools, clowns, and comics while hell is a committee that takes itself so seriously that it goes about making the possible impossible. You shall keep holy every day by playing with God rather than playing at being God. You shall honor all others by laughing at only what they give you permission to laugh at. You shall take yourself lightly, but your chosen responsibilities in life seriously. You shall use humor not only to survive the adversities of life but to thrive through them. You shall share humorous stories and insights freely and generously. You shall preach and practice what you preach – eternal optimism and positive paranoia.

I have a parishioner who has been planning for the past month for a “surprise” for me today; an April’s Fool kind. I know I will be on my guard to see what kind of surprise it might be. The element of anticipation and surprise is what makes a day like today special. Being surprised and fooled can only be remedied by a sense of humor. Our reaction to being caught off guard speaks volumes of how comfortable we are in our skin. Of course, if people cannot accept a joke, there is a problem, a problem of being too uptight, too serious, too normal.

My prayer will be a simple one: O God, give me a sense of humor to see a joke and pass it on to other folks.