



Francis of Assisi: The Fool



INTRODUCTION TO FRANCIS OF ASSISI

St. Francis (1181/1182–1226) is perhaps one of the most well-loved saints in the Christian tradition. Although we may have more of a Hallmark-card image of him as the birdbath Francis, always surrounded by animals with a look of peaceful bliss, he was also a saint who challenged the status quo.

Francis was one of those rowdy young men, much like St. Ignatius of Loyola, who was brought up in a very wealthy Italian family, had a life of parties, spent time daydreaming of becoming a knight, and then was sent off to fight in battle as a soldier. Captured, he began having visions while held in prison and returned home a different man.

Soon after his return Francis passed a leper, who previously would have caused him to turn away, but instead, he saw Jesus in this encounter and embraced and kissed the man. This encounter had a powerful effect on him and led him to renounce his great wealth and turn to a life of service. One day in the church of San Damiano, right outside of Assisi, he heard this invitation from Jesus: “Francis, rebuild my church which you see is falling into ruins.” Francis’s spontaneous response was a hearty yes, and he gathered a group of brothers together to achieve this.

In order to raise money to rebuild the church, he stole cloth and a horse from his father. His father was furious at this betrayal and dragged Francis in front of the bishop, who demanded that Francis repay his father. At this, Francis stripped himself naked and handed his clothes and the money over to his father, declaring that God was now the only father he recognized. He was given a rough tunic to wear. This Christ-like poverty was a radical notion at the time as the church reveled in riches and wealth.

Soon Francis gathered followers around him. He went from village to village preaching a new way of following the Gospel and even was found preaching to the animals. This earned him the nickname “God’s fool.” Francis once said to a cardinal who was overseeing a gathering of the friars: “I do not want to hear any mention of the rule of St. Augustine, of St. Bernard, or of St. Benedict. The Lord has told me that he wanted to make a new fool of me.” He was not so much rejecting these earlier rules as claiming his authority to make something new, something that may seem foolish to the ways of the world.

In chapter 9 of his First Rule, Francis wrote of his monks, “They should be glad to live among social outcasts.” This reminds me of a saying by the desert father Abba Nilus: “Happy is the monk who thinks he is the outcast of all.” The outcast is the one who doesn’t fit neatly into mainstream society. When we commit to the contemplative path, we are called to spaciousness and presence rather than rushing and productivity, choosing a simple life in the midst of an abundance of riches, and rejecting the pervasive consumer message. To be an outcast means that we don’t align ourselves with the dominant way of thinking.

Francis was a man who loved living life on the “edges” of things. Rejecting power, prestige, and wealth, he found freedom and joy in the simplicity of his path. Walking away from security he found new purpose. He lived out the gospel “preferential option for the

poor” and was drawn to those who lived on the margins, the poor and sick, just as Jesus did. He washed the bodies of lepers who were literally outcasts—people were forbidden to touch them.

Ultimately, what he was living out was a profoundly incarnational spirituality, which demands that we look at the world differently. It means that everything in our lives is alive with the sacred presence if only we commit ourselves to seeing anew. As we strive on the spiritual path for greater and greater heights, this may at first seem like a disappointment. Even after months of contemplative practice, we are called to encounter the divine in diapers and disappointments, preparing breakfast and commuting to work, in times of illness and grief, in the person who annoys us, and in the person we don’t even notice because we have turned away so many times.

In his famous poem “Canticle of the Creatures” where he praises the creatures and the constellations, the four elements of earth, water, wind, and fire, he even calls bodily death “Sister” because he recognizes her as friend in this life, as a reminder of what is essential. He composed this work a year before he died when he was nearly blind and growing more blind each day. Although no longer able to see, he described nature as a theophany, a place of divine encounter and intimate relationship. The canticle is a celebration of the incarnation through all of creation.

Francis calls us to an alternative way of being, to consider what responsibilities weigh us down and how we might discover more freedom. He invites us to dance on the edges of the world and find there the beauty of what is most central.

ICON SYMBOLISM: FRANCIS OF ASSISI

The quote “the world is my monastery” (sometimes translated as “the world is my cloister”) is attributed to St. Francis. He is pictured in his traditional brown robe and with the tonsure, a sign

of his commitment to poverty. Francis is dancing out in the fields with some of his animal companions, including the salmon, the fox, and the birds. The church behind him is in the process of being built because he was given the call to “rebuild.” I invite you to look with “soft eyes” upon the icon, eyes ready to receive rather than take, and open your heart up to whatever gifts may come from this time of prayer.

THE ARCHETYPE OF THE FOOL

“We are fools for the sake of Christ” (1 Cor 4:10). We have explored many aspects of Francis’s foolishness: stripping his clothing publicly, appearing naked in the church, renouncing his wealth, befriending all creatures, and calling his community of brothers “fools for Christ,” reflecting the words of St. Paul above. He tames a wolf, and during the Crusades, he walks unarmed across the Egyptian desert into the sultan’s camp where he had every reason to expect his own death, a foolish act indeed.

We are always being called to new revelation and to see the world from another perspective. The inner Fool is the one who helps us to see things anew and to dismantle the accepted wisdom of our times. Paul also writes, “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1 Cor 1:20). Productivity, striving, consumption, and speed are some of the false gods of our Western culture. A life committed to following the divine path is one that makes the world’s wisdom seem foolish, but conversely, the world often looks upon those with spiritual commitment as the ones who are “fools.”

This can be a challenging archetype for some of us as we often try to do everything possible so as not to look foolish. However, this archetype is the one that helps to subvert the dominant paradigm of acceptable ways of thinking and living. The author G. K. Chesterton, in his book about Francis of Assisi, explores the idea

of Francis seeing the world upside down, which is really seeing it right side up, because we get a totally new perspective. There is a subversive act of truth-telling through the Fool's humor and playfulness.

The Fool risks mockery by stepping out of socially acceptable roles and asks, where are we willing to look foolish? Through the Fool we find vicarious release for much we have repressed in ourselves. If we have always lived according to the "rules" or been overly concerned with how things look, the Fool invites us to break loose and play. The Fool encourages us to laugh at ourselves, reminding us that humor and humility have the same root, the Latin word *humus*, which means earth or ground.

By ignoring predictable or conventional behavior we encounter a fresh perspective. The Fool also helps to reveal the hypocrisies of life. For example, a king often had a court jester to help him see things differently and bring his ego in check. In modern times, founder of the Christian social justice magazine *Sojourners*, Jim Wallis, called Jon Stewart, when he was host of *The Daily Show*, the modern equivalent of the court jester, a companion to the Fool.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions says that "holy fools subvert prevailing orthodoxy and orthopraxis in order to point to the truth which lies beyond immediate conformity." The sacred function of the Fool is to tear down the illusions we hold so dear and illuminate what is new through playfulness and humor, using shocking or unconventional behavior to challenge the status quo or social norms. The Fool helps us to see beyond the dualities we live by.

We activate the Fool when we do something that others have a hard time understanding or accepting. I remember when John and I first began our move to Europe, and we sold off or gave away our possessions. Various family members and friends couldn't

understand different things we had let go of—how could we release our library of treasured books? How could I burn years of journals? How could John quit his secure job? To some, our choices appeared “foolish” because they didn’t fit their way of thinking about how you move through life. To others, they seemed liberating precisely because it was a different path chosen.

The Russian Church has a special word for saints who are regarded as holy fools: *yurodivi*. These are the wild souls who witness to other possibilities.

The Fool raises our insecurities. Can we risk showing up wearing the “wrong clothes” or nothing at all? There is an absolute vulnerability when we do something we know won’t be accepted by others. As we lock out the world with our keys and our plans, the Fool challenges us to see life differently.

The Fool has nothing to lose, does not cling to anything, has nothing for someone to steal. The Fool for Christ, says Eastern Orthodox Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, “has no possessions, no family, no position, and so can speak with a prophetic boldness.”

THE SHADOW SIDE OF THE FOOL

As with all the archetypes, when the Fool’s energy is not allowed, it is suppressed in the unconscious and comes out in other, often destructive ways. We find the shadow Fool when we use humor to tear people down or when we find ourselves moving toward cynicism rather than a constructive criticism of world problems.

The shadow Fool delights in breaking rules, regardless of the consequences, just for the sake of it, rather than to reveal a truth. The Fool in shadow form can also reject all the conventional norms of society without finding a balance of challenge and what needs to be done for self-preservation.

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JESUS AND THE FOOL ARCHETYPE: THE PARABLE OF THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD

REFLECTION BY JOHN VALTERS PAINTNER

“Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

—Matthew 20:14–16

Begin by reading the whole scripture passage and then pray with the excerpt in a contemplative way such as lectio divina (see guidelines in the appendix).

Jesus offers us this parable of the Holy Fool, the one who subverts the way things are done and confounds our expectations. Jesus sat at table with tax collectors and prostitutes. He healed on the Sabbath. He broke boundaries, turned things upside down, and invites us to do the same.

Conventional wisdom would say that the landowner of the vineyard is a foolish one. He was foolish not to hire enough workers, more than once. The landowner hires laborers at five different times throughout the day. That certainly seems a foolish waste of his valuable time.

Then the landowner is also foolish to pay those laborers who only worked part of the day the same standard wage as those who worked the entire day. Surely those hired last would not have expected a standard, full-day’s pay. The landowner is throwing money away when he doesn’t need to. He even foolishly jeopardizes his relationship with the labor force by paying equal wages for unequal work.

Conventional wisdom would also go on to answer that the laborers who are hired first have just cause to feel as if they’ve been

made fools of by the landowner. If he has the resources to pay a full day's wage to laborers who only put in a few hours of work, surely he could pay those laborers who put in more work a higher wage.

But when the landowner is confronted by the laborers who were hired earlier in the day, he adds insult to injury when he turns the tables on them. He contends that he did these laborers no wrong. He paid them what they agreed to be paid for the work they agreed to do. What is it to them if he pays others the same wage for less work? What right do they have to tell him what to do with his money?

The underlying question that Jesus is asking in this parable is, why be jealous or upset about the success of someone else, particularly when you have enough? Everyone is paid because everyone was given work.

And isn't that the real motivation of the landowner? The parable states he goes out and sees others standing idle. The landowner doesn't hire them because he needs more laborers; he hires them because they need work and the wage it brings.

It is a foolish business model, as viewed from today's standards. But the landowner is not thinking in terms of the laws of economics. He is thinking in terms of the Laws of the Covenant, one of which is to share one's wealth with those in need (see Leviticus 19:9 and 23:22 and Deuteronomy 24:19).

Ultimately God's ways are not our own. Our expectations will be disappointed again and again if we go by conventional terms. The Fool invites us to embrace the One whose logic goes against our preconceived ideas, inviting us into an upside-down world governed by love.



THE PRACTICE OF HUMILITY

The Fool calls us to remember our own earthiness, to know that one day Sister Death will visit us as well. The desert monks and St. Benedict also counseled “remember daily that one day you will die.” In embracing this truth we can find freedom. We begin to take ourselves and the weight of our concerns less seriously.

“Be humble” is a call that might raise your hackles a bit. I know it does for me. Humility can be used to subjugate those whose voices we do not want to hear. Or we can take on false humility and act as though we are not full of pride as a way to increase our standing.

Esther de Waal describes the practice of humility as recognizing that I am “profoundly earthed.” To do this I only need ponder all the ways I am reliant on the earth for provision of food and air and sunlight. Humility reminds us that we have limitations and we can’t take on everything, which also enables us to commit to something and do it very well.

Humility is really a dance between embracing our limits and our giftedness. It means finding humor in our shortcomings and foibles and learning to take ourselves less seriously. But it also means seeing the world through this lens and learning to see things from another perspective.

The Fool finds liberation in humility because concerns over how we will appear are set aside for an expression of the deep truths of our soul. In connecting with our inner Fools we are able to risk seeming foolish in service of freeing ourselves to follow what is most essential. Humility can help illuminate the way ahead.

MEDITATION: INVITING YOUR INNER FOOL

Find a comfortable seat, and take a few moments to settle into your body. Become aware of places of tightness and holding, and

breathe into those places, shifting in any way needed to bring ease.

Allow your breath to deepen and bring you to a still point within. Imagine drawing your awareness down to your heart center and resting there for a few moments as you connect to what your experience is in this moment. Just let yourself have whatever feelings are rising up, without trying to change them.

From this heart-centered place invite Francis to be present with you in this time of prayer. Welcome him in and notice how he is dressed. See his mannerisms and expressions. Spend a few moments connecting with his presence and then welcoming in the Spirit to be present as well with you both.

Ask Francis and the Spirit to help show you your own inner Fool. As you drop inward, see if you might release to a playful open-hearted quality. Breathe in the gift of humility and feel the tender weight of your own earthiness.

Ask to be shown the places of life that you perhaps take too seriously. What creates tension for you? Where do you feel constricted?

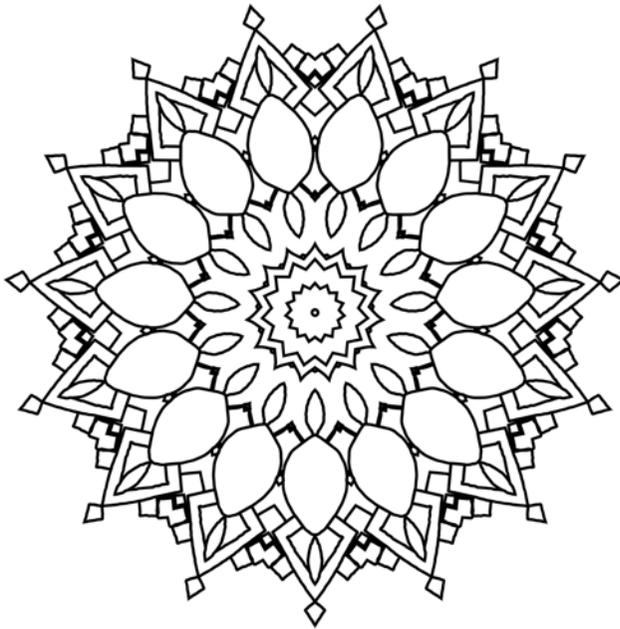
Open yourself to seeing what conventions of your life need some challenge. Where are the places you are most afraid of looking foolish? Can you invite Francis, the Spirit, and the archetypal energy of the inner Fool to be with you gently here?

Then let the places of embarrassment shimmer forth. What in your life makes you blush at the thought? When have been the moments when you have felt most embarrassed? Allow these to be shown to you and notice if there are any patterns.

Sit for a while with these images and then ask what most hinders you from taking seriously your inner gifts and dreams. What are the obstacles that feel too difficult? The people's opinions you take most seriously or whom you don't want to disappoint? Just allow this to unfold as well.

When you feel ready to close this time of prayer, ask for a gift, a symbol of some kind to carry with you back to the outer world. Once this becomes clear, let it move into a gesture in your body. Then let your breath carry you back to the room and spend some time writing any insights or experiences you want to remember.

MANDALA EXPLORATION: COLORING MANDALAS



For your first exploration in working with mandalas I invite you to gather some colored pens, pencils, crayons, or markers. Whatever coloring materials you might have are just fine. You can download a full-page version of the mandala from Abbeyoft-heArts.com or make a copy of the one here. These mandalas come from artist Stacy Wills.

There is something about allowing ourselves the gift of coloring, like we did when we were children, that can tap into a

place of carefree innocence, much like what the Fool offers to the world.

When beginning any creative exploration, it is important to create a sacred space within which to work. Turn off the phone and e-mail notifications, light a candle, find some time when you will not be disturbed by others, and put a sign on your door if necessary. Decide if you want to play quiet music or just lean into the silence.

Awakening your energy through gentle movement can be helpful. Consider putting on a song, perhaps one that feels playful to you or resonant with the Fool's energy, and just let yourself move in response to the music. This can be very helpful in moving out of your head and down into your body and heart space.

Allow a few moments to pause first and connect to your breath by allowing a few deep inhales and exhales. Then just become aware of the grace you seek in this time. It may be as simple as "I seek the grace of freedom to enter in without inner judgment or criticism" or something like "I seek the grace of allowing my inner Fool to speak to me in new ways, to listen for the invitations." Just tune into what you need for yourself.

As you move through the time of creating, become aware of any voices that arise that might interfere with or undermine your process. Honor their presence and then gently let them go, returning to your breath as an anchor and way of staying focused on the process of creation.

Let this time of creating be a prayer, a communication with God who is always infusing whatever we do. Invite the Spirit into this time of coloring as a way of opening yourself to whatever wisdom wants to emerge. After centering yourself through breath and prayer, notice if there is a color that chooses you from the variety of possibilities. As you tap into your inner Fool, notice which color sparks your heart and begin there.

When you have completed the coloring, rest for a few minutes with the mandala in front of you. Gently return to your breath, and simply behold the image, which means to look with a receptive gaze. You aren't trying to figure anything out here; just be with what has come forth in this time.

At the end of each creative exploration, I highly recommend allowing some time to journal. Notice the process—what happened while you were creating, what feelings and judgments rose up—and dialogue with the colors and images that emerged.

FOR REFLECTION

- What about Francis's story most inspires or energizes you? Where do you feel the strongest connection or disconnection?
- What concrete steps toward holy foolishness can you make in your life?
- Where in your life do you feel called to something but are afraid of the risk of looking like a fool?
- How might you practice humility and this sense of being profoundly earthed in your life?
- What did the visual art exploration experience reveal to you?

CLOSING BLESSING

The poem below was inspired by my own imagining what it would be like to hang out with Francis in an Irish pub, which is a place of connection and merriment. I can see him completely at home and making everyone else feel at ease by the sheer joy, openness, and utter foolishness of his presence.

St. Francis at the Corner Pub

Approaching the door, you can already
hear his generous laughter.

He stands on the bar upside down for a moment
to get a new perspective on things,

a flash of polka-dotted boxers
as his brown robe cascades over his head,

sandaled toes wiggling in the air in time with
a fiddle playing in the corner.

Rain falls heavily in the deepening darkness
and he orders a round of drinks

despite his vow of poverty and the single silver coin
in his pocket, multiplied by the last Guinness poured.

Nothing like a good glass of wine, he gleefully says,
heavy Italian accent echoing through the room,

he holds it up to the overhead light, pausing for a moment
lost in its crimson splendor, breathes deeply.

At ease among fishmongers and plumbers,
widows and college students, and the

single mother sneaking out for a moment
of freedom from colic, cries, and diapers.

As the wind blows rain sideways, in come the
animals, *benvenuti* to pigeons, squirrels, seagulls, crows,

and the neighborhood cat balding from mange,
a chorus of yowls, coos, caws, and meows arising,

all huddle around him. No one objects to the growing
menagerie, just glad to be dry and warm.

He clinks glasses all around, no one left out.

May you continue to discover the delight of holy foolishness, and may Francis and the Fool guide you to new perspectives and possibilities. May joy and laughter illuminate the way ahead.