

Spokane Friends Meeting, August 30, 2026

"Holy Fools"

Scripture: [1 Corinthians 4:9-13](#) and [Psalm 131](#);

also [2 Samuel 6:12-22](#) and [Romans 12:2](#)

Johan Maurer

Thank you for welcoming me back! ... Although you may rethink your hospitality after I reveal my intention for this morning, as I talk about holy fools. I'm not just going to talk about them as an interesting and instructive phenomenon in Christianity, but to suggest that, at our best, we may all be at least at the brink of being holy fools ourselves, and I hope to invite you to step across that line.

Let me start by saying a few things about the term "holy fool," also sometimes worded "fool for Christ." Admittedly, the word "fool" is a bit of a linguistic stumbling block, because there's really no way to soften it or romanticize it. The Byzantine Greek word from church history is rather slangy and could be translated as "crackpot." The Russian word suggests someone who is "not normal," or to use more current slang, "not adequate." The important point is that this non-normalcy is deliberate behavior by people who intend to crucify personal pride for the sake of radical obedience and their confrontations with idolatry and social hypocrisy. In the Russian context, this eccentricity or non-normalness is sometimes associated with spiritual innocence. To risk a stereotype, this seems to me to be another example of the ability I often saw among Russians to be both very pragmatic and receptive to mystical dimensions of reality at the same time.

In any case, I'm cautious about the use of the word "fools," which in ordinary conversation is not usually a compliment. After all, Matthew warned us in the Sermon on the Mount that calling someone a fool in contempt was a mortal sin. Would I want to be called a fool? You all know me as a paragon of dignity and decorum at all times (*readers: this line was delivered with a wink!*), but I hope I'm not far away from this status. I hope I have the humility to qualify, but I know that, whenever I'm in worship, I enter a sort of zone of quiet ecstasy that I recognize in some of the fools I'm going to talk about. Maybe you experience something like that as well.

Some commentators point to the more eccentric examples of those who are known in history as holy fools, although those eccentricities are certainly not the whole picture. The history of the Christian church in Russia has many such eccentric examples. In the 1500's, a famous Russian holy fool was St Basil the Blessed. I'm sure most of you are aware of St Basil's Cathedral on Red Square in Moscow, just outside the walls of Moscow's Kremlin. Tsar Ivan the Terrible had ordered the construction of this cathedral to commemorate a military victory, but after St Basil died, the cathedral was renamed for him.

Why is St Basil known as a holy fool? He was intensely devoted to Jesus, and he expressed this devotion and this intensity in his dedication to caring for suffering people, people in poverty, alcoholics, and also those made sick by greed or power. He begged on the streets on behalf of those who couldn't or wouldn't beg on their own behalf. He often begged wearing chains instead of clothing, and those chains are still on display at the cathedral's museum. Sometimes he threw stones at rich people's homes. He was known to be a prophet, in the extrasensory as well as the political sense. He once had the nerve to rebuke the tsar for inattentiveness during a church service.

No doubt he was a holy handful for whatever bishops had authority over him, but nevertheless it was the church itself that recognized and canonized him, because they acknowledged that his way of life and his behavior were in fact gifts from God. His manner of living for Christ and for those in poverty was seen as a calling, and his gifts of prophecy and discernment were recognized.

In the history of the church, many holy fools share some of these features of St Basil's life. They often had no fixed home, but wandered as they felt led. They often behaved in ways we might now call "street theater," such as going without normal clothing, even in the cold of winter, wearing chains, behaving eccentrically during the day as provocateurs to challenge complacency in the society around them and in the church hierarchy. However strangely they may have behaved during the day, they were often known for spending nights in prayer. John Saward's study, *Perfect Fools: Folly for*

Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality, which was a great help to me in preparing for today, points out that holy fools are especially prominent in the church in times of relative peace and calm, when church life and discipline can become lax and routine, and they are less evident in times of crisis.

Sticking with these more dramatic images for a moment, we can find plenty of candidates for “holy fool” status in the Bible. King David himself wore a simple priestly covering as he danced with wild abandon during the parade that brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, as reported in the second book of Samuel, chapter six. His first wife Mikhal was watching the spectacle from a window. She later scolded her husband, saying:

How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!

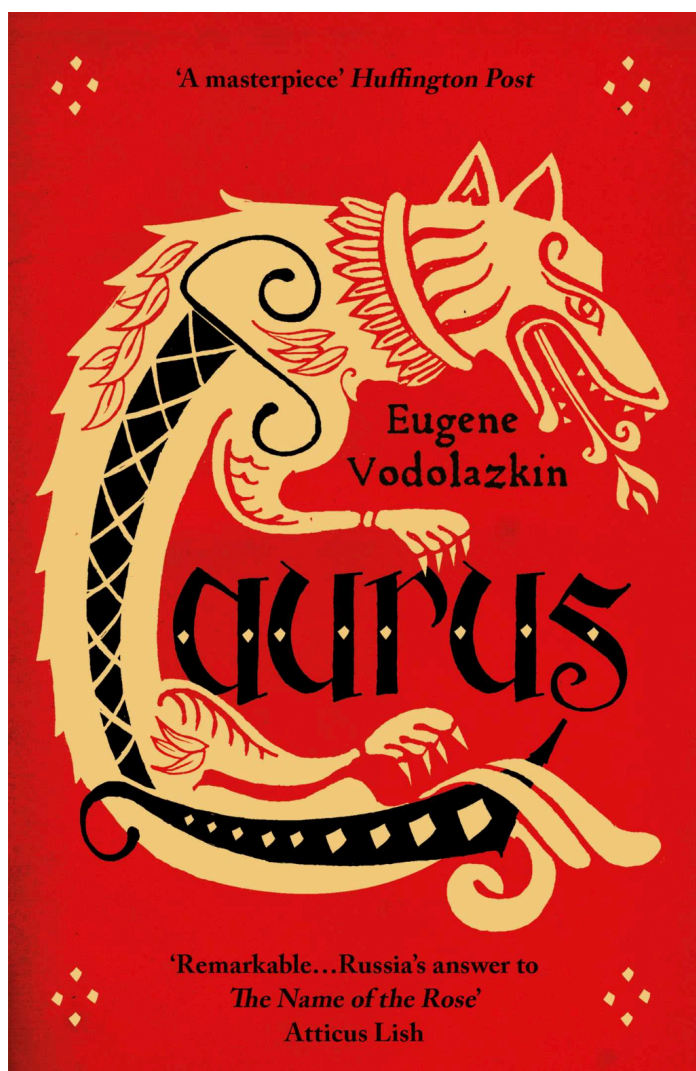
He replied,

It was before the Lord, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the Lord's people Israel—I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honor.

So, just as the holy fools of church history, David essentially puts piety before propriety, even at the cost of self-humiliation. Many biblical prophets carried out their apparent foolishness at God's direct command: Ezekiel, lying tied up in ropes on his left side for 390 days, and then on his right side for 40 days, warning of the punishment facing Israel and Judah. Jeremiah, smashing a clay pot in front of Jerusalem's elders, anticipating the destruction of the city, and then wearing a yoke to signal the Babylonian captivity. Hosea's marriage to Gomer, a woman described as unfaithful, a marriage that God commanded because Israel was unfaithful to God. Isaiah going naked and barefoot for three years as a sign of God's displeasure with Israel's unfortunate alliances.

Some of these characters have inspired writers. Some of Sherwood Anderson's characters seem to me to be secular versions of holy fools. The Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor made the spiritual dimensions of *her* holy fools more explicit.

My favorite literary image of a holy fool is the wanderer, herbalist, healer, and prophet at the center of the novel *Laurus*, by the contemporary Russian novelist Evgeny Vodolazkin. Maybe you already know it. Normally, novels with a medieval setting are very low on my priority list, but so many people I respect recommended it, I broke down and read it, and I'm very glad I did. I liked it for its magical realism, its decidedly unromantic compassion, its strangely layered approach to time, and its portrait of Laurus as a man of complex faith. So I'm going to take a moment to show you the cover, in case you're intrigued and want to jot down the title.



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The real-life Basil and the fictional Laurus were living lives transformed by faith, in cultures that claimed to be formed by that faith. We see from their stories that this was not easy, and required them to challenge the complacency and hypocrisy around them. Maybe they identified a bit with St Paul, who challenged the complacency he found at the Corinthian congregation he had helped create. In First Corinthians 4:9-13 he vented his feelings. John Saward sets up Paul's message by defining the division between worldly wisdom (that is, conventional wisdom) and the foolishness of the Gospel, as follows: (with a bit of editing by me....)

If the wisdom of the world is folly to God, and God's own foolishness is the only true wisdom, it follows that the worldly wise, to become *truly* wise, must become foolish and renounce their worldly wisdom ... and have the mind of Christ ... who emptied himself and became obedient unto death, even death on the cross.

This, then, is the first opposition: the wisdom of God versus the wisdom of the world. The second follows from it. If there is a necessary distinction between the self-centred wisdom of the world and the cross-centred wisdom of God, there must also be an opposition among Christians between those seduced by the world into adjusting the Gospel to worldly wisdom, and those who trust in God's wisdom alone. This is the issue between the apostle and the Corinthian church. Paul uses biting sarcasm in his effort to humble the Corinthians and make them give up the vanity that has deformed their Christian character.

Now, over to Paul, this time from the New English Bible:

For it seems to me God has made us apostles the most abject of mankind. We are like men condemned to death in the arena, a spectacle to the whole universe-angels as well as men. We are fools for Christ's sake, while you are such sensible Christians. We are weak; you are so powerful. We are in disgrace; you are honoured. To this day we go hungry and thirsty and in rags; we are roughly handled; we wander from place to place; we wear ourselves out

working with our own hands. They curse us, and we bless; they persecute us, and we submit to it; they slander us, and we humbly make our appeal. We are treated as the scum of the earth, the dregs of humanity, to this very day.

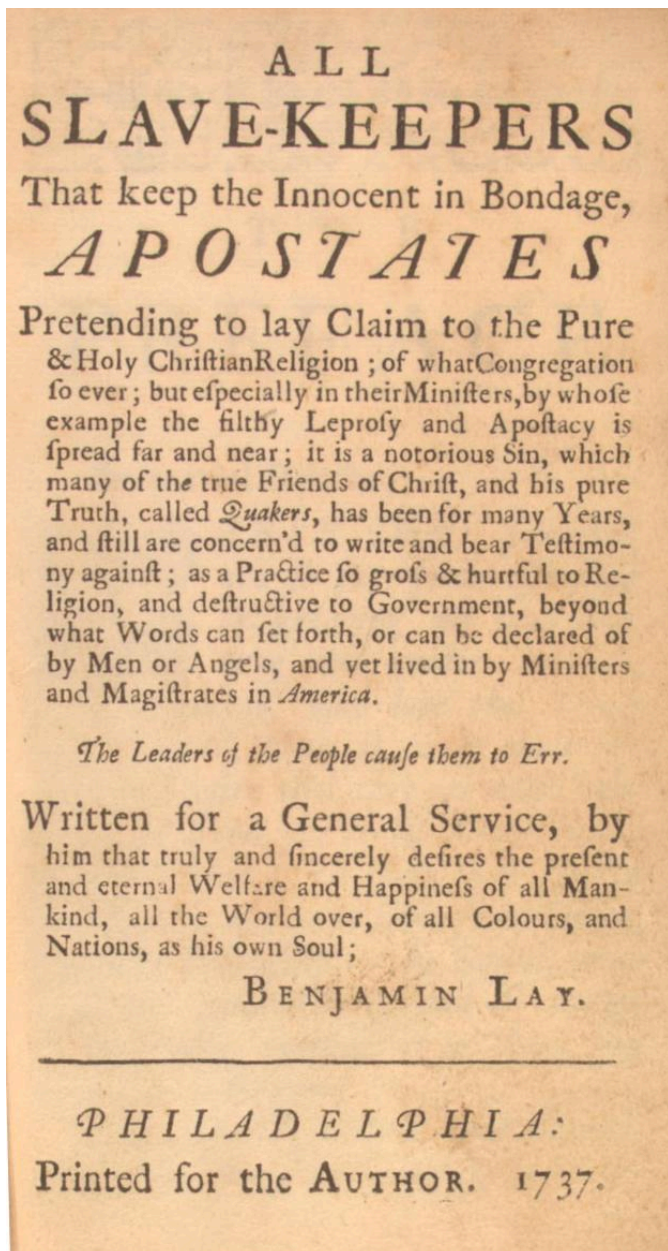
Do any of these insights into being sensible or being fools for Christ's sake apply to the present day? Are we in a state of complacency, where our devotion to Christ calls us to take the risk of shaking things up among the faithful, or is the whole world in crisis, calling for us to unite and be ready to challenge the external principalities and powers and evil in high places? As candidate holy fools, where would we direct our foolishness?

As I was preparing these words for today, I stopped to think of whether I could come up with any Quaker holy fools. Would being Quaker excuse us from the more extravagant or transgressive behaviors used by the classical examples we've talked about?

The very first generations of Friends, back in the seventeenth century, included several Friends who were known for some very zealous behavior. George Fox, for example, was walking through the cathedral city of Lichfield, England, and had a vision of a river of blood in the street and pooling at the marketplace. He was led to walk barefoot in the winter weather, crying out "Woe to the bloody city of Lichfield!" As he later understood, he was being led to commemorate a slaughter of martyrs that had taken place more than a thousand years earlier in that very place. As for his prophetic preaching in churches, with and without permission, we can read accounts in his journal. His *Book of Miracles*, for which we only have the index, recorded healings attributed to him, as well as the unfortunate fates of some of his opponents.

Quakers had quieted down quite a bit by the eighteenth century. But fear not, the passionate antislavery campaigner Benjamin Lay provides quite a contrast. No doubt, some of you already know his story. His constant, and consistent witness against slavery, in person, and in writing, led to frequent clashes with Friends who didn't share his dedication. One of the most famous protests was his appearing at Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1738, during which he appeared to stab a Bible he was

carrying, but hidden in the book was a bladder full of pokeberry juice, that looked like blood, and as the liquid spurted out he shouted, “Thus shall God shed the blood of those persons who enslave their fellow creatures!” Some of his street theatrics seem no less audacious than those of the holy fools a thousand years earlier. And once again the target audience was primarily his own faith community.



Just in case you wonder whether he was clear enough about his cause, here's the title of his book-length case against slavery and hypocrisy:

All Slave-Keepers That keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates Pretending to lay Claim to the Pure & Holy Christian Religion; of what Congregation so ever; but especially in their Ministers, by whose example the filthy Leprosy and Apostacy is spread far and near; it is a notorious Sin, which many of the true Friends of Christ, and his pure Truth, called Quakers, has been for many Years, and still are concern'd to write and bear Testimony against; as a Practice so gross & hurtful to Religion, and destructive to Government, beyond what Words can set forth, or can be declared of by Men or Angels, and yet lived in by Ministers and Magistrates in America.

The cover doesn't reveal that the book was “printed for the author” by Benjamin Franklin.

Just to provide a couple of far more gentle candidates from the last century, here's a story passed along by Thomas Kelly in his essay “The Gathered Meeting.”

John Hughes once told of two Friends sitting side by side in such a gathered meeting. The secret currents of worship flowed with power and then encountered a check. One man moved nervously but did not rise to his feet. Finally the other Friend arose and spoke a few words of searching power, and the meeting proceeded in a sense of covering. After the meeting had broken the man who had spoken nudged his silent neighbor and said “Next time, Henry, say it thyself”.

Kelly’s own gentle spirit does not match the holy fools’ typical level of confrontation, but in his last years before his death at age 47, he was constant in his pleas for us to go deeper in our lives of prayer and service. In that mission, he wasn’t above tweaking us a bit, as in this observation in his 1939 sermon “On Holy Obedience,” included in the book *A Testament of Devotion*:

(The historical context: this address was delivered in the spring of 1939, with war clouds descending over Europe, and just after Kelly’s travels among Quakers in Germany.)

To this extraordinary life [that is, of holy obedience] I call you—or He calls you through me—not as a lovely ideal, a charming pattern to aim at hopefully, but as a serious, concrete program of life, to be lived here and now, in industrial America, by you and by me.

This is something wholly different from mild, conventional religion which, with respectable skirts held back by dainty fingers, anxiously tries to fish the world out of the mudhole of its own selfishness. Our churches, our meeting houses are full of such respectable and amiable people. We have plenty of Quakers to follow God the first half of the way. Many of us have become as mildly and as conventionally religious as were the church folk of three centuries ago, against whose mildness and mediocrity and passionlessness George Fox and his followers flung themselves with all the passion of a glorious and a new discovery and with all the energy of dedicated lives. In

some, says William James, religion exists as a dull habit, in others as an acute fever. Religion as a dull habit is not that for which Christ lived and died.

George Fox as a youth was religious enough to meet all earthly standards and was even proposed as a student for the ministry. But the insatiable God-hunger in him drove him from such mediocrity into a passionate quest for the real whole-wheat Bread of Life. Sensible relatives told him to settle down and get married. Thinking him crazy, they took him to a doctor to have his blood let—the equivalent of being taken to a psychiatrist in these days, as are modern conscientious objectors to war in Belgium and France.

Parents, if some of your children are seized with this imperative God-hunger, don't tell them to snap out of it and get a job, but carry them patiently in your love, or at least keep hands off and let the holy work of God proceed in their souls. Young people, you who have in you the stirrings of perfection, the sweet, sweet rapture of God Himself within you, be faithful to Him until the last lingering bit of self is surrendered and you are wholly God-possessed.

So: If Kelly himself doesn't qualify as at least an honorary holy fool, he could certainly be accused of helping to develop a new generation of such dedicated souls. Similarly, if we sense that the term just doesn't apply to us for whatever reason, may our Quaker communities be ready to support those who respond in extraordinary ways to the invitation we just heard from Thomas Kelly.

Another gentle Quakerly soul, who used his provocative innocence to open up conversations about eternity, was the naturalist and French teacher William Bacon Evans, 1875-1964, who is sometimes referred to as the last "plain Friend" in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, speaking to individuals as "thee" and "thy" and wearing the simple collarless Quaker suits of an earlier era. When I was a young adult Friend in Canadian Yearly Meeting, there were several older Canadian Friends who remembered Bacon Evans's visits to their yearly meeting sessions. He always carried little puzzles for the children, and as they played with the puzzles, he would quietly talk about faith with them. Some of them remembered his unusual headgear:



[Photo credit: Theodore B. Hetzel]

Within Friends, he was known, in Anna Cox Brinton's words, as "a tireless worker for love and unity, and meetings everywhere welcomed the minister whose terse religious utterances and inexhaustible fund of vivid illustrations often shocked his hearers into right-mindedness, his zeal on their behalf rendered acceptable by his wit."

He used the novelty value of his plain dress and plain language to open up conversations about faith wherever he was, among Friends or in public. There are so many stories about him; maybe you already know some of them. At a meeting for worship in a rural meetinghouse in Pennsylvania, a hen came waddling in through the open door. Evans rose and asked the hen, "What does thee have to lay before the meeting?" Another time, in Philadelphia, he had parked his car at a parking meter, and a police officer observed him simply sitting in the car, motionless. As I heard the story, the police officer asked him through the car window whether everything was all right. Evans reportedly replied, "As thee can see, I still have time left on the meter."

I leave it up to you to decide whether these recent examples of plain and honest preaching, and the use of gentle humor, are functionally equivalent to the older patterns of holy fools. Maybe there's a better tag for our present times, but I would not like to water down the holy fools' call to utter devotion, being not conformed to this world but transformed, and engaging in public confrontations with complacency, arrogance, and hypocrisy.

In closing, I want to commend to you, once again, my old friend Psalm 131, which I will read in a moment as a prelude to open worship. But first, in case they're helpful, I offer these queries, which as always you should just set aside if they don't resonate this morning. Thanks for your kind attention and good company!

Queries:

1. Do you have something of the holy fool in you? Is there someone you could ask to help you discern the answer?
2. What kinds (plural) of dedicated souls does this time in our planet's history especially require? What can Spokane Friends do to encourage the emergence and equipping of such souls?

Psalm 131:

- 1 My heart is not proud, Lord,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.**
- 2 But I have calmed and quieted myself,
I am like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child I am content.**
- 3 Israel, put your hope in the Lord
both now and forevermore.**