

Apostles Anglican Church

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Fools and Warning Labels

Epiphany 4

(Micah 6:1-8, Ps 37:1-11, 1 Cor 1:18-31, Matt 5:1-12)

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

H. L. Mencken wrote for the Baltimore newspapers “The Sun” and “The Evening Sun.” His column of 18 September 1926 expressed a sentiment much copied and oft quoted — in one form or another — in the years since. He wrote:

No one in this world, as far as I know — and I have searched the records for years, and employed agents to help me — has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people.

I do not know about losing money, by I do know a thing or two about statistics. It is a statistical fact that half of the people in the world are of below average intelligence and it is equally true, from my experience, that *more* than half typically act like it, myself certainly included. We are comically, and sometimes tragically, foolish, the lot of us — some pretty much all the time and all at least some of the time. Frankly, most of us are just one bad decision away from making the evening news.

If you have your doubts about this, just consider these actual warning labels on real products, and remember that such labels are put there for a reason, often a reason born of painful experience.

On a hair dryer: Caution! Do not use while sleeping.

On an iron-on shirt decal: Caution! (You see where this is going, right?) Do not iron while wearing shirt.

On a package of fire place logs: Caution! Risk of fire.

On a fish hook: Caution! Harmful if swallowed. (It is good that fish can't read.)

On a can of pepper spray: Warning! May irritate eyes.

On an electric hand drill: Caution! This product not intended for use as a dental drill. (So much for do it yourself, at home root canals, which I'll bet you can find instructional videos for on YouTube.)

On a baby stroller: Caution! Remove child before folding. (It is so much easier to fold the child when it is out of the stroller.)

Convinced yet?

Of course, there are some products with hidden risks and dangers which really must be explicitly stated; think of the side effects of medications, which even the most intelligent among us could not be expected to know. Those warning labels are necessary to protect the foolish and the wise.

The foolish and the wise: which category do Christians fall in: foolish or wise? Well, we proudly fly the foolish flag; we are holy fools for Christ, all of us. I don't mean to be insulting, but let's just look at some of the foolish things we must believe to be a Christian.

A human baby was born of a virgin. Now, we're pretty sex-savvy. Parthenogenesis — virgin birth — does not occur naturally in mammals. So a human virgin birth? Foolish.

That baby, though fully human, was also fully God. And not just any god, but the God by whom, through whom, and for whom all things were created; the God who called a people — the Jews, of all people — through whom he would rescue a world clearly gone to the dogs. A God-man? One special people? Rescue? Foolish.

This baby, when grown, ran afoul of the authorities for his preaching and rabble rousing; he got himself arrested, sentenced to death, and executed on a Roman cross. And he seemed to think — certainly his followers said later — that by his crucifixion he redeemed and renewed all things: defeated death, atoned for sin, delivered man from slavery to fallen powers. But, just look around. Things seem pretty much as they always have. To assume otherwise, to assume his death accomplished those claims, is, well it's just foolish.

And then this one: three days after he was as good and dead as a door nail, this man rose again, claimed all authority in heaven and on earth, gave power to his disciples, promised to return, and ascended into heaven where he has been reigning ever since at the right hand of his Father. But dead men don't rise up; there is no only-used-once resale coffin market on eBay. I could continue, but it's all right there in the Apostles' Creed, one foolish claim after another:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
He was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven,

and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen (BCP 2019, p. 20).

All of this has been thoroughly debunked by philosophy, science, history, sociology and many other -isms, -ologies, -osophies and, well, just plain common sense. And yet the foolishness persists. This — all of it — is what Christians are foolish enough to believe, what we have to be foolish enough to believe.

Yes, we Christians are foolish. But don't take it from me. Here's St. Paul:

26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; **28** God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, **29** so that no human being might boast in the presence of God (1 Cor 1:26-29).

St. Paul says the situation is really worse than I let on. Not only are we foolish — of course, we are — but also weak, lowly, despised — nothing at all to boast of except that, for reasons known only to himself, God loves us and has chosen us. St. Paul assures us that there is Godly method to this apparent madness, and even Godly wisdom amidst this very real human foolishness. But, again, only a fool would believe that.

And that brings me round again to warning labels. Foolish people need warning labels for their own protection and often for the protection of others. And this is where I think the Church sometimes lets us down with a hard bump. The very things that are the most dangerous are the very things that the Church fails to label as hazardous. Take baptism, for example, which is certainly as dangerous as drowning or waterboarding; in every baptism someone dies.

A fine young man, Chase, will be baptized here today. I know he has been well prepared for this moment through proper catechesis; Dcn Michelle has led him faithfully through the ACNA catechism, *To Be A Christian*, and has answered all his questions clearly and thoroughly, I am sure. But, frankly — and I say this with great love and respect — Dcn Michelle is just one fool preparing another fool to do a very foolish thing in the presence of a whole assembly of fools. I will wager — you can apparently bet on anything now days — that no one has ever asked Chase whether

he's sure he really wants to do this, whether he really knows what he's getting himself into, and, all in all, whether he wouldn't really like a little more time to think this whole thing over. The Church will ask him these questions in a bit, but, by then the die is cast; it's almost too late to back out. Baptism needs a warning label and the Church doesn't put one on it, at least not prominently. So, let me give some of the needed cautions.

The Rite of Baptism begins with renunciations. The candidate will face away from the altar, looking out into the spiritual darkness from which he comes and from which he is escaping, and he will tell the world, the flesh, and the devil to "go to hell" where they belong, if you'll pardon my language. I don't use it flippantly but quite intentionally. These powers, the very powers of hell, have had control over him; these powers have enslaved him until today when he rises up and says, "No more! I renounce you!" And he can bet — we can all be sure — that this act of holy rebellion will not go unnoticed or unchallenged. The world presents us no opposition as long as we are marching in step with it. But turn around and head the other way and you will find yourself surrounded and blocked at every turn, a spiritual pedestrian going the wrong way on a very crowded one way sidewalk. You have to fight your way through. The flesh is not an issue as long as you pamper it — pamper yourself — and indulge your passions. But just try saying "no" to a few things — no to sex or power or money or honor or just to selfishly insisting on having your own way — and you'll see just how strong the pull of the flesh really is. And the devil? You're picking a fight there with a being far more ancient, far more cunning, far more powerful than you can begin to imagine. If you think standing up to the high school bully was hard and risky and, well, maybe foolish, you've got no idea what the devil is capable of. But, at least the Church offers you a weapon: a smear of oil and a prayer:

Almighty God deliver you from the powers of darkness and evil, and lead you into the light and obedience of the kingdom of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen (BCP 2019, p. 164).

And, do you want to know the truly foolish thing? The Church believes that this oil blessed by our Bishop, a successor of the Apostles, has real power, that this prayer actually accomplishes by the grace of our God exactly what it says — deliverance from the powers of darkness and evil. Sheer foolishness, unless, just perhaps it's true. We fools believe it's true. We fools know it to be true.

These renunciations are just the beginning. Having made them, the baptismal candidate then turns toward the light of the Church and the Altar and makes vows to turn to Jesus Christ and to confess him as Lord and Savior, to receive the Christian Faith as revealed in the Old and New Testaments, and — here's the kicker — to obediently keep God's holy will and commandments and to walk in them all the days of his life (see BCP 2019, pp. 164-165).

The foolishness here is obvious, isn't it? In a culture that values and elevates personal autonomy above all else, to confess that one has a Lord, to choose subservience to

another is even worse than foolishness; it is almost a form of cultural blasphemy. And to receive the Old and New Testaments as revealed truth? Those old stories, those Semitic myths — truth? Only a fool could believe that. But it is the last vow that is perhaps the most foolish, the most in need of a warning label: the vow to obediently keep God's holy will and commandments and to walk in them all the days of one's life. Does one just coming to baptism have any idea what this vow entails? Do any of us?

Let's be clear. This vow isn't one-and-done. I've said the right things, I've been baptized, so I'm good to go. Sorry, but no. This vow isn't a matter of personal piety: of going to church once a week and perhaps even staying for Spiritual Formation once in awhile; of praying the right prayers and knowing when to stand, kneel, and cross yourself; of giving confession a try. Sorry, but no. Let's be clear on this because the prophet Micah was clear on it and spoke clearly the word of God on it:

6 “With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

8 He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:6-8)?

So, what does it mean to obediently keep God's holy will and commandments and to walk in them all the days of one's life? It means to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. And here's the warning label for all those foolish enough to vow to justice and kindness and humility before God: it is difficult and costly and you will not survive it intact and unchanged, if you survive it at all. Christian history, the Church calendar, our entire Christian consciousness is replete with *martyrs*, with those who died while doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with God, with those who died *for* doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with God. Why are these practices so dangerous?

Justice is more than keeping the letter of the Law. Justice is the act of setting to rights what has gone wrong — through the power of the Holy Spirit and the response of human agency — what has gone wrong first in oneself and then in the world. The passions that rage inside you and the passions that undergird the powers of this present darkness — political powers, economic powers, military powers, all the powers of darkness — these do not want the world to be put to rights, they do not want the proud scattered in the imaginations of their hearts or the mighty brought down from their thrones or the humble and meek to be exalted or the rich to be sent empty away

while the hungry are filled with good things (see the Magnificat, BCP 2019, p. 45). And the powers will strike back. They struck back at Jesus. Justice is dangerous business.

And kindness? It is more than the occasional good deed. It is a life committed to mercy, to loving one's neighbor as oneself, to forgiving when wounded, to laying down one's life for a friend and even, perhaps, for an enemy: for Roman occupiers, for a self-serving High Priest, for a brutal and cowardly regional governor, for a Republican, for a Democrat, for an illegal immigrant, for an ICE agent, for all the image bearers of God, which means for all of us. Kindness, mercy, look exactly like Jesus who prayed for his Father to forgive those who were nailing him to the cross even while they were nailing him to the cross. Kindness is dangerous business.

To walk humbly with God is to answer the same call Jesus gave to his Apostles: Come, follow me. Come, leave behind family and friends, the comforts of home, the security of a career and bank account, the hard earned reputation, and, just maybe, life itself. And for what? For the great adventure. For walking humbly *with God*. With *God*. Just be warned. Humility is dangerous business.

Now, a word from Jesus. Imagine you are filling out a job application or perhaps sitting for an interview and the questions are posed: Why should we hire you? What do you "bring to the table?" With a pause, a deep breath, and a silent prayer you respond:

I am poor in spirit. Apart from God's grace there is no health in me.

I am in mourning for the brokenness of the world and for my own complicity in it.

I take my place with the meek and lowly of the world. I have no power or prestige.

I am hungry and thirsty, not for wealth or pleasure or power or honor but for holiness and for things to be made right.

I know the world's great need for mercy, and I know where, I know in whom, it is to be found.

I am not yet pure in heart, but I long to be, for in the pure heart, God may be seen.

I believe in and strive for peace — real peace — not just the strategic cessation of hostilities until advantage can be regained, but the peace that blesses my enemies.

Because of all this, I know what it is like to be persecuted and reviled, to be falsely maligned and I know, on my best days, how to be glad and rejoice in that persecution.

By God's grace, that is what I bring to the table. Actually, it is what I pray to receive *at the Table*.

So much foolishness. Who would hire such a person? For what work is such a person fit? Well, Jesus would "hire" such a one; that person is fit for work in the Kingdom of God.

We Christians believe all of this foolishness: mostly we do, sometimes we even act as if we do. So, in spite of the labels that might warn us off, we nevertheless come to the water of baptism, come to the Altar for bread and wine — for the Body and Blood of Christ — come to the fellowship of the Church, come to Christ himself gladly as holy fools, because we know that St. Paul was right when he said:

20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? **21** For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. **22** For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, **23** but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, **24** but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. **25** For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (1 Cor 1:20-25).

And all we fools say, "Amen."