



# HOLY FOOLS

*Following Jesus with Reckless Abandon*

M A T H E W   W O O D L E Y



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*Holy Fools: Following Jesus with Reckless Abandon*

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“Matt Woodley points the way by reminding us of a tradition that is firmly rooted in Scripture and the life of Christ, but which has been largely lost. If we love God enough to love his world, we would do well to reflect on whether the holy fools of history can teach us something significant about faithfully engaging our world with the gospel.”

**DENIS D. HAACK**

*Founder, Ransom Fellowship*

“Some books on ‘spirituality’ are so narcissistic they give me hives. But this is the real deal: It’s ancient and fresh, self-deprecating and reader-challenging, irritating and soothing. Matt Woodley is a funny guy. He’s also a gifted writer, a gentle pastor, an insightful guide. His book challenged me and made me want to grow up.”

**KEVIN MILLER**

*Executive Vice President, Christianity Today International*

“With humility and an unhindered transparency, Mathew Woodley writes this refreshing wake-up call to those of us bored with today’s deeply rutted, trudging Christian journey. A must-read for those who dare to leave footprints today.”

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**MICHAEL GLERUP**

*Project director, Center for Early African Christianity*

“Honest, practical, biblical, and rooted in engaging stories, This is the kind of book every disciple of Christ will enjoy reading and putting into practice.”

**ED CYZEWSKI**

*Author of Coffeehouse Theology: Reflecting on God in Everyday Life*

“*Holy Fools* is like smelling salt. Through the stories of those unable to settle for the status quo, Mathew Woodley confronts our spiritual apathy to release the holy fool in us all.”

**MARK MILLER**

*Author of Experiential Storytelling*

“Mathew Woodley is a winsome and engaging tour guide to another way of Christian faith. In *Holy Fools*, he leads us down a path that is undomesticated, playful, and dangerously alive.”

**MARK SCANDRETTE**

*Author of Soul Graffiti: Making a Life in the Way of Jesus*

“*Holy Fools* challenges us to leave the ghettos of our church communities and befriend the ragged, who will shock and scandalize those safely nestled inside the church. A refreshing journey.”

**DEREK WILLIAMS**

*Cofounder, executive producer, and writer at QU4D, LLC*

“Thoughtfully written and spiritually refreshing, Woodley dares us to join Jesus and his motley crew on a crazy journey of holy folly. It will be the smartest thing we ever do.”

**PAUL LOUIS METZGER**

*Author and professor, Multnomah Biblical Seminary*

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*I happily dedicate this book to my wife, Julie. More than anyone I know, by loving Jesus with reckless abandon, you exude—no, you ooze—the precious and rare oil of holy folly.*

*I love you.*

...

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*Thank you for allowing me to “grow up” in Jesus with you.*

# Holy Fools: The Ants in Our Spiritual Pants

*Only a fool would attempt to change the world with a simple message of love and peace. So we can conclude that Jesus was a fool. Only fools would agree to follow such a man. . . . So we can conclude that all of us are fools. . . . So let all happily admit that we are fools. Then we will happily commit ourselves to change the world.*

SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM  
*(fourth century AD)*

**I'LL NEVER FORGET THE DAY** when my friend Alan, a contemporary holy fool, awakened my heart to love God on a deeper level. Alan, a plump little man in his late thirties, was born with Down syndrome. But that never stopped him from worshiping with us. Every Sunday, Alan, our most devoted worshiper, sat in the front pew, singing loudly and off-key and depositing a one-dollar bill in the offering plate. More than anyone else I know, Alan is crazy about God.

Every year Alan watched our church go through the motions of handing out Bibles to the sixth-grade Sunday school classes. We marched the children through the routine procedure, most of them receiving the Bibles with blank and listless faces. Alan, the founding member of the “Happy Friends” Sunday school class for those with disabilities, felt a little cheated. “Hey, how come we don’t get Bibles?” he asked his teachers. Alan insisted that we give Bibles to the Happy Friends, too.

So three months later, during our main Sunday morning worship service, Alan and the Happy Friends received their Bibles—but it was far from routine. As I gave a Bible to Alan, he started weeping. And then with dramatic flair, Alan held the Bible high over his head for thirty seconds. Everyone watched in rapt attention as he lowered the Bible to his lips, fervently kissing it and then embracing it as if it were a teddy bear. Alan continued beaming and praising God until I finally invited him to sit down.

Alan's playful, love-ravished "sermon" unsettled God's settled people. He disrupted my agenda and pierced my heart. On that Sunday morning, Alan's enthusiasm subverted our expectations, undercutting our spiritual complacency and our listless routine of worship. In the process, he awakened our hearts to the wonder of God's grace.

Such is the power of the holy fool.

Most of us are familiar with the unholy fool mentioned in Proverbs. He's the dolt who spurns advice, acts compulsively, returns to his own vomit, and chatters like a nitwit. We're told to watch this fool and then do the opposite. But most of us haven't considered the other fool mentioned in Scripture—the "holy fool," or the "fool for Christ's sake." To be honest, that phrase still grates on me. A fool for Christ? I'll gladly be "mature in Christ" or "respectable for Christ" or "Spirit-filled for Christ" or "cutting-edge for Christ." But a fool for Christ? How does that fit into a culture (and a church culture) obsessed with pragmatism, efficiency, relevance, and respectability?

And yet, we can't deny that there is a stream of holy folly running right through the Old Testament prophets, the letters from the apostle Paul (who coined the phrase "fools for Christ" [1 Corinthians 4:10]), and two thousand years of Christian spirituality. We find this stream running through the early monastic

movement in “fools” known as the desert fathers and mothers—a motley bunch of fourth-century Christians who left the security of a safe but complacent, compromised church to seek God in the margins of society.<sup>1</sup> We also see the stream of holy folly meandering through later Christ followers such as Saint Francis of Assisi and Hudson Taylor, the forerunner of missions to China. Most important, in the life and teachings and death of Jesus, we find the ultimate expression of holy folly.

I have to warn you, though: The holy fools are a strange breed, and the stream of holy folly flows with quirky twists and turns. And yet this odd group of Jesus followers has certainly grown on me. Like a very strong espresso or a bucket of icy water dumped on my head, they provide the jolt my soul needs. When I feel lulled into spiritual slumber, they are the Spirit-inspired alarm that startles me and wakes me up. Maybe we all need a holy-fool-inspired awakening.

The holy fools often jar our sensibilities of respectable Christianity—but that is precisely the point. They don’t just “fire us up.” They trip us and knock us off balance. I believe the Christian community, especially in the affluent West, needs to walk with this motley band of holy fools. The stories of holy fools have provoked, stirred, disrupted, and challenged me. I hope that the stories will startle and shock us. I also hope they’ll make us laugh, because the holy fools certainly have a sense of humor. More than anything, I hope they rattle our spiritual complacency, causing us to take ourselves less seriously and to take God far more seriously. To paraphrase Frederick Buechner, I hope they’ll serve as the ants in the pants of our faith, crawling up our legs, getting in our underwear, itching and irritating us just enough so we can’t sit still.

However, right from the start I need to issue two warning statements. *First, holy folly is not an excuse for blatant anti-intellectualism.* I meet far too many Christ followers who think authentic

spirituality and stupidity (or at least anti-intellectualism) go hand in hand. I strongly disagree. Our minds are amazing instruments; God wants us to use them. Pure faith and clear thinking belong together. In this regard, I love the challenge from the brilliant scientist-theologian Dr. John Polkinghorne:

Many people seem to think that faith involves shutting one's eyes, gritting one's teeth, and believing six impossible things before breakfast because the Bible or the Pope or some other questionable authority tells us so. Not at all! Faith may involve a leap, but it's a leap into the light, not into the dark. The aim of the religious quest, like that of the scientific quest, is to seek motivated belief about what is the case. . . . [Christianity] can only be of real value if it's actually true. It's not a technique for whistling in the dark to keep our spirits up.<sup>2</sup>

The holy fools often used nontraditional teaching techniques. Sometimes they eschewed logical arguments or even words. They aimed to reform our hearts and our behavior, not just give another stale lecture so we could store more information in our frontal lobes. I often say that if I consistently obeyed 3 percent of what I know about the Bible, I'd be on my way to sainthood. The holy fools assumed that most of us already have plenty of correct doctrine and biblical knowledge; they were annoyed with our lack of application. So they devised "nonrational" approaches to awaken us to specific biblical truths. And by the way, many of these nonrational approaches were brilliant in their intellectual depth and psychological effectiveness. But despite these unconventional approaches, the holy fools wouldn't tell us to bury our brains in the sand.

*Second, holy folly does not demand slavish imitation.* I'm a middle-aged pastor living on Long Island. I have a wife and four

children, and I try to obey the law. If I walked around like the prophet Isaiah with my buttocks bared (see Isaiah 20:2), I'd probably end up in jail. My elder board loves me in all my sin and brokenness (way beyond what I deserve), but they would definitely draw the line at public nakedness, even if I was demonstrating a spiritual truth. They haven't written it into our church constitution or my employment contract, but I just have a hunch they wouldn't tolerate bare buttocks for Jesus' sake.

In other words, I cannot slavishly imitate every detail from the actions of the holy fools. I cannot wipe the snot from lepers' noses here in New York (I've never met a real leper) or move to the desert for thirty years (the nearest desert is 1,500 miles away) or throw nuts at church ladies (see chapter 1 for other such examples of holy folly). People wouldn't get the point. I can't seek to imitate all the specific actions of past holy fools; however, I do want to capture and emulate the spirit of the holy fools. I want and desperately need their immoderate passion for God. I want and desperately need their compassion for marginal people. I need their fiery quest to please God above anything else.

So before we read about and apply this holy fools stream of Christian spirituality, we'll need to refine our skills of thinking and discernment. We'll need to ponder some challenging questions: What do the holy fools mean for us today? How can we apply their extraordinary—and sometimes downright strange—behavior to our lives in this culture? And how does a middle-class, middle-aged American who may never see a real desert apply their message? Of course, I ask these questions firmly believing that, although their tactics are unusual (that's putting it mildly), they still challenge us today.

So are you ready to trade in a “nice” but bland version of Christianity for the dangerous but rewarding path of the holy fools? Are you willing to open your soul to the road that the holy

fools—ancient and contemporary—have walked before us? Are you willing to be rattled out of complacency into an immoderate love for God and others? If you are willing to have your life shaken up and turned upside down for the sake of Christ, you are ready to begin the journey of holy folly.

## C H A P T E R 1



# Discovering God's Ragged Children

*There are two kinds of fools in this world: damned fools and what Saint Paul calls “fools for Christ’s sake.”*

FREDERICK BUECHNER

**ABOUT TEN YEARS AGO** I served as the pastor of a thriving church in a small town in northeastern Minnesota. Everyone in the church and even the whole town liked me. I suppose it was a tiny town—about four hundred people and nine hundred dairy cows—but most of them (the people, that is) *really* liked me. They liked my sermons, my dedication, my niceness, my spiritual maturity, and my professional competence. So based on the assessment of that teeny church in that tiny town of four hundred people, I decided to like myself.

Everyone seemed to like the deal . . . except for some of my closest friends. For some reason, they thought my spiritual life was veering off course. I couldn't understand why. After all, everything seemed headed in the right direction. But as I look back on my life, I realize that they were trying to get my attention. For instance, my wife tried to tell me that in my pursuit of success I had ditched her heart. I didn't listen because I thought she was the one in need of a major spiritual awakening; I wasn't. Personally, I swallowed the press clippings about my life: "Matt is a great guy who meets our needs. Hurrah for Matt!"

Then somewhere on my path it hit me: My heart really is dead inside. Actually, it happened while I was leading a ten-day youth mission trip, crammed into large vans, sleeping in muggy church basements, and tearing off dilapidated roofs with a dozen unmotivated teenagers. This trip was one of my more "spiritual" and "sacrificial" ministry moments, but even so, deep down, I knew that my spiritual life needed a jolt, a revamping, a kick in the pants, and a major awakening. My faith had become mild, respectable, safe, reasonable, and utterly dull. I went through all the right motions and applied the right formulas, but my faith had grown complacent.

That night, alone and desperate, I hunched over the steering wheel in our church van and wept. But in that moment of desperation, God initiated a new phase in my spiritual journey. Over the next ten years God started to awaken my heart with the stunning, tangy, mysterious, delightful, surprising, and heart-ravishing good news of the Gospel. Obviously, the Holy Spirit orchestrated the entire process. Obviously, God brought me back to his Word again and again.

But along the path of this major reawakening, God also brought some powerful and wise spiritual mentors into my life. Just to warn you, this isn't exactly a touching *Tuesdays with Morrie*

kind of tale. The mentors God placed in my life were, shall we say, unique. Okay, at times they were utterly bizarre. First of all, most of them have been dead for a long time. And they probably wouldn't qualify as cool and competent spiritual guides in most of our churches. As a matter of fact, most of them wouldn't qualify to write Christian books, lead church growth seminars, serve as pastors, or even pour the orange juice during our Sunday morning "bagel time." These mentors have far too many sharp, quirky, ragged edges. In the history of Christian spirituality, they're called the "Holy Fools," a strange breed of Christ followers marked by an unconventional, edgy, countercultural but entirely Christ-haunted, God-passionate, and Spirit-drunk approach to a journey with Christ. Through these unlikely guides, God gave me the jolt, the wake-up call, and the kick in the pants that I so desperately needed.

This is the story of my long, slow awakening and the strange band of ragged mentors—the holy fools—God used to lead me deeper into his grace.

## **Who Are the Holy Fools?**

Like children playing peekaboo, the faces of God's holy fools began to jump out at me during this slow journey of reawakening to Christ. As I read the story of Christian spirituality across the ages, I noticed the startling presence of these unsettling saints who followed the path of holy folly. Let me share a few of the stories of holy fools that I encountered.

In the Old Testament I discovered a ragged gang called the prophets. "The prophets are crazy and the inspired men are fools!" according to the people in Hosea's time (see chapter 9:7). Hosea blamed the prophets' low approval rating on the hard-heartedness

of the people, but one could also argue that the prophets brought it on themselves. Hosea married a prostitute (see Hosea 1:2). Jeremiah wore a back-bending oxen yoke (see Jeremiah 27:2). Isaiah “walked around naked and barefoot” for three years (Isaiah 20:2-3). Ezekiel “out-follyed” all the prophets by baking his bread over a pile of human excrement (see Ezekiel 4:12).<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the apostle Paul had the prophets in mind when he wrote his first letter to the church at Corinth. Writing to a Christian community riddled with elitism and arrogance, Paul claimed to be exhibit A of holy folly. In sharp contrast to the “super apostles”—those ultraslick, dashing, polished, and eloquent spiritual leaders who were wooing the church—Paul ironically proclaimed, “We are fools for Christ. . . . We have become the scum of the earth” (1 Corinthians 4:10, 13, NIV), or as *The Message* puts it, “potato peelings from the culture’s kitchen.”

Nearly four hundred years after Paul, just as Christians were achieving personal comfort and social respectability, a group of countercultural believers fled the comforts of noisy streets and cozy church buildings. They moved into the desert, building small huts, weaving baskets for the poor, memorizing Scripture, wearing ragged clothes, eating rough bread and oil, engaging in contemplative prayer and spiritual warfare, and practicing radical compassion with unlimited hospitality. And that was only the beginning of a legacy of other holy fools who followed in their footsteps.<sup>2</sup>

A young man named Moling, a seventh-century Irish holy fool, had such Christlike love for lepers that he developed a ministry of caring for their physical needs, even to the point of wiping the snot from their running noses.

Christiana, a young woman living in medieval France, developed a deep aversion to unpleasant body odors. Nevertheless, she felt compelled to bring the love of Christ to peasants with poor hygiene. As she bound their wounds, she avoided vomiting

by frequently bolting outside for fresh air. Christiana continued her ministry to hygienically challenged peasants throughout her life.

A young man named Francis came to Christ and promptly cast away all his possessions (and his father's too). He walked barefoot (and buck naked at least once), kissed lepers, and rebuilt a dilapidated church building on the outskirts of town. We call him a saint; his neighbors called him "*Pazzo!*"—madman.

In Russia during the sixteenth century, a *yurodivi* (the Russian word for "holy fool") named Basil scandalized and enraged respectable church people by tripping the most "righteous" church members as they entered the church, throwing stones at the homes of rich people who ignored the poor, and bathing the feet of prostitutes and demoniacs with his tears.

In the late 1800s, a forty-year-old single woman named Mary Slessor left her conventional church in Scotland and ventured into the heart of western Africa. After mastering the language and learning the culture, she spent the rest of her life in the jungle adopting unwanted babies, protecting battered women, and warding off enraged hippos and tribal chiefs.

About the same time, a young man named Hudson Taylor, a missionary in China, scandalized his respectable Christian friends by shaving his head—everything except the long, braided pigtail worn by the Chinese men of his day. He also wore the traditional Chinese pajama-like clothing and ate with chopsticks. We consider him a paragon of cross-cultural engagement; his own mission board deemed him an extremist.

I must confess, at least initially, these people irked me. Some of their antics qualified for a "spirituality of the weird." What's the point of weaving baskets in the desert, wiping snot from lepers' noses, or walking around buck naked? Is it really commendable to throw stones at houses? If body odors disgust you, perhaps it's

time to take a “spiritual gifts inventory” and find a ministry that matches your unique temperament. How could these people serve as spiritual role models to me?

At least that was my initial response. At times these radical saints still bewilder me, but in the past ten years I’ve also developed a strange fascination with them. They didn’t give neat formulas or pat answers for the journey in Christ. They didn’t “settle” my spiritual life. Instead, like a strong wind rushing through dead leaves, they unsettled and scattered the dry fragments in my heart.

I noticed that every holy fool fit a certain profile—a profile that stood in marked contrast to the sad state of my spiritual life.

1. **The holy fools had passion.** Unlike me, the shocking believers in this stream of Christian spirituality were anything but mild; instead, they were excessive—excessively in love with God. All of them were willing to play the fool to follow Christ. All of them were willing to let the message of Christ “have the run of the house” in their lives (Colossians 3:16, *The Message*). I was busy serving Jesus, but I couldn’t say I was living passionately for him. Somehow in the midst of doing stuff for Jesus, I had disconnected my heart from Jesus.
2. **The holy fools exuded “messy” spirituality.** Most of my previous mentors were models of spiritual neatness and order. For instance, when I was in junior high I remember spotting a huge billboard advertising the slick spirituality of a “decent” Christian family. The billboard contained a family of four—father, mother, boy, girl—who confidently displayed spiritual tidiness. Father and son were dressed neatly in a suit and tie, their hair slicked down with a shiny, greasy petroleum prod-

uct (probably our favorite brand—Lucky Tiger). The mother and daughter wore conservative dresses, their hair tucked straight and crisp. All four of them folded their hands in prayer as they gazed off into the heavenly realms. The caption told us their secret: “The Family That Prays Together Stays Together.”<sup>3</sup>

The billboard’s implications were clear. To be a Christian—or at least a churchgoer—implied respectability, cleanliness, conventionality. Christians are nice, decent, mild human beings who reinforce the status quo. I was trying hard to be *that* kind of Christian, but after twenty years, my spiritual life was unraveling. I was a tight, tidy, pompous Christian bore.

As I met the holy fools, I encountered another approach to the spiritual journey in Christ. They were anything but orderly, conventional, or even “appropriate.” They didn’t care about appearing “spiritually mature” or “religiously suave.” They knew that spiritual growth is like giving birth: It’s a painful, inconvenient, and messy process. This leads to some unpredictable conclusions: The sign of progress is not laughter but the gift of tears; the best ministry is to be silent with God; the best deeds are hidden from sight; the path to spiritual power is through our weakness; freedom comes from total surrender. The Lucky Tiger family had everything laid out so neat and clean. In sharp contrast, the holy fools were a long way from the family on the billboard; instead, they were countercultural, disorderly, shocking, and wild. They certainly weren’t tidy, pompous Christian bores.

- 3. The holy fools liked messy people.** They never flinched from engaging the culture around them. Instead, they strategically dwelled on the margins of society so they could embrace other marginal strugglers. I, on the other

hand, had entrenched myself behind the cozy walls of my Christian ghetto, feverishly impressing clean, religious people. The holy fools engaged the dregs of their culture—prostitutes, demoniacs, the poor, the insane, the lepers, and the disabled. Their mission was to love misfits, people untouched by the respectable and righteous church people of their day. And they wanted to awaken the church to this mission as well.

4. **The holy fools were always in trouble.** With their excessive passion, their messy spirituality, and their sketchy friends, the holy fools weren't very popular. Good people mocked them. The good people's children threw stones at them. Public authorities locked them up. Church leaders branded them extremists. Average churchgoers wanted to wring their necks. In a church culture based on self-righteous separation and a cool and passionless spirituality, the holy fools just didn't fit.

## **The Ultimate Holy Fool**

As I continued to engage this motley crew of holy fools, I began to notice a distinct resemblance to another very famous holy fool—Jesus. In my clean and tidy Christian world, we never classified Jesus as a fool. Instead, Jesus was the nice, well-mannered, conventional CEO of the slick Lucky Tiger people. But as I read the Gospels through the lens of holy folly, I discovered that Jesus was not a Lucky Tiger kind of guy. Yes, Jesus was and is the eternal Son of God, the perfect radiance of the Father's glory (see Hebrews 1:3). Yes, Jesus' teaching sparkled with wit, wisdom, and sanity. But the more I read the Gospels, the more I concluded

that Jesus also fit the profile of a holy fool, and not just any holy fool, but the ultimate holy fool.

For starters, Jesus had a messy approach to the spiritual journey. Consider his birth. Theologians call it the Incarnation, which is a nice way to describe the wild story of God's shocking and messy descent into our bloody brokenness. The early Greek intellectuals were repulsed by this gross and indecent hallmark of Christian belief. I read an obscure Greek philosopher who ridiculed the Incarnation by asking sarcastically, "How can one admit the divine should become an embryo, that after his birth he is put in swaddling clothes, that he is soiled with blood and bile and worse things yet."<sup>4</sup>

Soiled with blood and bile and worse things? What bad form. Surely a proper God, a really smart God, a slick and impressive God, could think of a better entrance into the world. How utterly messy, ragged, and foolish!

Then consider his messy approach to death. There's nothing quite as ragged or shocking as a crucifixion. Death by crucifixion was not only bloody and noisy and obscene (decent people didn't even mention the word), it also stigmatized the crucified as a troublesome rebel and a low-life loser.<sup>5</sup> God redeeming the world by dying on a cross? The "logic" of a Savior dying on a cross, an instrument of execution reserved for common criminals, seems beyond inappropriate and illogical—even downright nonsense. Only a powerful, wonder-working, enemy-smashing God can really save people. But God on a cross, a Messiah who became vulnerable, a Savior of suffering love? How stupid can you get?

During my first pastorate I met a fiery fifteen-year-old foster boy named Jimmy who clearly understood the scandal of the Cross. Jimmy wasn't his birth name. Born on the streets of Chile, Jimmy lost his mother early in life, and his father, a drunken and enraged man, used to beat Jimmy and his sister. So when

most children were adding two plus two and eating peanut butter sandwiches, Jimmy was learning to run and fight—fighting his father, fighting corrupt cops who despised runaway children, fighting other street kids for scraps of food in hotel Dumpsters.

One day a nice couple from Minnesota adopted Jimmy and his sister, but Jimmy couldn't stop fighting. He fought so hard that his new parents released him to the state and he was, at last, delivered to the home of Leon and Nancy, committed Christians, members of my first church, and foster parents to ten boys at a time. Jimmy helped make punch for our coffee fellowship hour, and he seemed interested in God . . . until we discussed the Cross. As I explained the last days of Jesus' life and how he chose to die a painful death on a Roman cross for our sins, Jimmy's eyes widened with shock and horror. With a look of utter disgust, Jimmy asked, "Why would anyone do something that stupid? Jesus is a fool!" Then Jimmy proceeded to tell a more suitable ending to the story: Instead of dying, Jesus pulls out an AK-47 assault rifle and guns down his enemies. Rather than the "victory" of his crucifixion, Jesus, the big man with the fast gun, stands victorious over a pile of bloody, bullet-ridden corpses. "Yeah," Jimmy concluded, nodding his head in approval, "now that would make Jesus cool and not a fool."

"Well, Jimmy," I remember responding, "that sure is interesting. Um, that's not the typical answer I hear from the church kids around here, but I appreciate your honesty." I still appreciate Jimmy's honesty. He was more honest than many believers. We wear crosses around our necks and sing sentimental songs about the cross. We invite Jesus into our lives and our churches, but we let him stay only if he behaves like the nice family on the billboard. "Keep your hair plastered down with Lucky Tiger," we tell Jesus, "and don't start knocking over tables or bleeding on a cross.

And please don't drip any blood on the new carpet. Be decent, Jesus. Be appropriate and well-mannered.”

According to Jimmy (and the entire New Testament), however, there is an edge to Jesus and his death on a cross—a shocking, brutal, and horrible edge. The cross is messy and inappropriate. It looks downright stupid. If God really wanted to save the planet, he couldn't have picked a more ridiculous instrument.

The biblical writers plowed into and even reveled in the irony of it all. Through the weakness of the Cross, God displayed power, canceling our debt and disarming “the spiritual rulers and authorities . . . by his victory over them on the cross” (Colossians 2:15). For the early Christians, this notion was deliciously subversive and ironic. The wisest and strongest and bravest couldn't concoct a plan to cancel our debt, disarm the powers, reconcile us with God, and heal broken hearts and a broken planet (see 1 Corinthians 1:21). But God, like a grand master chess player, used one unpredictable but masterful move—the Cross—to put all the pieces in place, confounding the powers of darkness and sweeping us into his victory over sin and death and hell. Through the foolishness of the Cross, God displayed wisdom, resolving the greatest philosophical, ethical, and relational dilemma in the universe: how to reconcile a holy God with sinful humanity. In doing so, he embraced lost creatures as sons and daughters and brought healing to a broken universe (see Romans 8:22-24).

Then consider Jesus' messy, unconventional teachings. I began to notice the sharp edges to his spirituality. Jesus is filled with surprises. Guess who gets blessed with outrageous happiness? According to Jesus, it's the poor in spirit, the mourners, the persecuted (see Matthew 5:3-12). Guess who receives the healing touch of God? It's not the healthy or the righteous; it's sick people—distorted, broken, and bleeding sinners who desperately need mercy (see Matthew 9:9-13). Guess how the father responds

to his rebellious son who wasted his life and ate pig slop? He sprints toward him, embraces him, kisses him, and gives him a big, fat, juicy steak (see Luke 15:11-24). Guess who went home justified before God? Surprise, it's not the guy who sat up front and prayed the long, eloquent prayers; it's the loser in the back pew who, with tears streaming down his face, doesn't feel worthy to step through the church doors (see Luke 18:9-14).

Like the holy fools throughout history, Jesus' behavior opened him to the mockery of others. After his first public sermon, a group of religious leaders tried to shove him over a cliff (see Luke 4:29). His closest relatives labeled him a half-baked, excessive fool (see Mark 3:21). The Bible scholars of his day claimed Jesus was possessed not only by a demon but by the "prince of demons" (Mark 3:22).

The religious leaders had good reason to question Jesus' approach. To start with, they argued, look at the people he embraced: prostitutes, lepers, tax collectors, uncouth fishermen, and "sinners." He allowed a woman of questionable character to barge into his presence and sensuously<sup>6</sup> wipe his feet with her tears and her hair (see Luke 7:36-50). Lepers begged for healing and he broke social etiquette by tenderly touching them (see Mark 1:40-45). When he met a wild-eyed demoniac, wrapped in chains and howling in the tombs, Jesus performed a counter-cultural act by addressing and then healing the man (see Mark 5:1-20). Much to the shock of decent people everywhere, Jesus invited himself to dinner with a notorious sawed-off, greedy rip-off artist named Zacchaeus (see Luke 19:1-10).

I concluded that the Gospels were the story of God's holy folly, the sheer foolishness of a God who does outlandish things for unlikely people. It wasn't nice and proper. Jesus was about as well mannered as a tornado sweeping through your living room, violently picking up and tossing everything in its path—sofas,

chairs, tables, lamps, even the carpeting—until nothing remains except the firm concrete underneath your feet. Which, once again, is precisely the role of Jesus and every Christlike fool. The holy fools started to gut my heart of a smug, tidy, pompous spirituality until I stood squarely on God's mercy.

### **A Strange Way to Wake Up**

It dawned on me that Jesus and his ragtag band of holy fools were on a spiritual journey radically different from mine. I had achieved decency, order, and respectability, and I associated with like-minded people. The holy fools disrupted all of that. They rattled me. Through their messy and unconventional approach to faith in Christ, these ragged saints offered me a “ministry of awakening.” My faith had grown cold; they wanted to light a fire deep within my heart. I was coasting on my spiritual journey; they kicked me in the rear end. I recall the Southern writer Flannery O'Connor explaining why she wrote such extreme, shocking, and even grotesque short stories. “To the hard of hearing,” she said, “you have to shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures.” The holy fools were shouting and scribbling to my nearly deaf and blind soul.

And this certainly wasn't the suave spirituality of the billboard family. Holy fools didn't lull the faithful with visions of sweetness and decency; they shocked the faithful with the surprising edge of Jesus' path. They viewed spiritual complacency as the greatest danger to the Christian journey. So everything they did was directed at awakening and startling men and women whose hearts had grown numb, dull, and apathetic.

But I also notice that authentic holy fools never reveled in their novelty or extremism. They didn't aim at a cutting-edge

lifestyle; they merely embarked on a journey with Jesus—and they allowed it to change everything. They drank in the pure gospel long enough for it to permanently alter their brains. The gospel threw them off balance; it made them drunk with God until they staggered with a holy passion. They became extremists, but theirs was an extremism of love, an immoderate, extraordinary, uncalculated pursuit of love for God and their neighbors.

Compared to the holy fools, how stiff and stuffy my spirituality appears. How correct but how tepid. While I dutifully follow my Bible reading plan, they allowed God’s Word to break their hearts wide open. While I talk about witnessing to my neighbors, they actually invited them into their lives and their homes. While I analyze contemplative prayer, they moved into the silent forests and practiced it. With their playful antics, they are in the process of subverting my spiritual arrogance.

## **Encounters with Contemporary Holy Fools**

All the holy fools give me the same invitation: Wake up! But they don’t offer that invitation through trite words or predictable methods. Instead, with unexpected and playful twists, they penetrate my normal defenses and subvert my normal expectations, awakening my heart.

I’ll never forget a contemporary holy fool named Roberta. Roberta’s family didn’t fit the profile of the “perfect church people.” They followed a ragged path to church and to Jesus. Roberta’s dad had recently dropped dead from a heart attack. Church had never been an option in her mom’s spiritual outlook. She had too many questions and too much anger toward God to fit into your typical small group. But her grieving mom, Roberta, and her older brother started coming to our church, and

we started loving them. Roberta's mom kept showing up, bringing the kids, learning, growing, questioning, and finding some answers, until best of all, she found Jesus (or Jesus found her). Roberta's mom is feisty and smart and funny, and we love having her. She asks hard questions and won't settle for cheap answers, but she keeps seeking and growing.

Anyway, one fine Sunday morning we started worship with the children's choir dressed in white shirts and red vests singing a lovely introit. Roberta was front and center, singing loudly. She's a wonderful kid, but on that particular morning she kept getting the song wrong. The words from her mouth didn't match what all the other kids were singing. Roberta grew more and more frustrated until she just gave up and sat on the floor, leaning against our wooden lectern. The lectern started to wobble until it finally plummeted off the altar area and smacked right into the middle of the Communion table, crushing the shiny silver Communion trays. Our nice children's choir kept singing the lovely introit as two ushers scrambled to set up the lectern.

Everyone pretended it didn't happen, but for the rest of the service I kept staring at the silver cross on top of the Communion tray. When the lectern fell on that beautiful tray, it crushed the pretty silver cross. At a few points in the service I discreetly tried to straighten the silver cross until I finally gave up. I just left it twisted and flattened. And then it hit me: We try so hard to make our worship pretty and peaceful. And certainly I'm in favor of beauty (God is, after all, a God of beauty). But when Jesus shows up, he reminds us that our worship is beautiful because God became ugly; it's peaceful because Jesus endured agony; it's nice and clean because the lovely Son of God spilled his blood all over the raw earth.

Thank you, Roberta. On a nice Sunday morning you led me in worship. You ushered me onto holy ground. You created the

most profound Communion service I've ever experienced. You are a holy fool for Christ.

Over a ten-year period God has used surprising mentors like Alan, Ezekiel, Paul, Moling, Francis, Mary, and of course Jesus to stir, disrupt, and awaken my heart. This is the story of my unexpected journey with the holy fools. In particular it's the story of how God awakened me in key areas of my life: vulnerability, compassion, spiritual discipline, and spiritual passion.

Twelve years ago as I sat hunched over the steering wheel of the church van, a broken and pierced man, I had no idea that God was taking me on a new journey. It started as an awakening to my own vulnerability. As God awakened my heart, he began to subvert and demolish my walls of self-righteousness. And strangely enough, it all started with the creeping awareness of a virus that was threatening to suck the spiritual life right out of me if I didn't act quickly.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

What is the level of your passion for Christ? Do you do things for Jesus while your heart has disconnected from him?

Does your spiritual journey in Christ constantly take turns that surprise you? Or is your journey entirely predictable and mild?

Do you love "messy people"? Who are the misfits (besides yourself) you are loving in Jesus' name?

Have you ever been in trouble for your faith in Christ? When was the last time someone claimed that you, your small group, or your entire church was spiritually "drunk with God" until you "staggered with a holy passion"?

Do you know someone who is a contemporary holy fool? What are the potential dangers and gifts of holy folly?

# Recommended Reading

- Bondi, Roberta.** *To Love as God Loves*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987. A fine introduction to desert spirituality.
- Chan, Simon.** *Spiritual Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998. A fresh look at spiritual disciplines, including some excellent material on developing a “rule of life.”
- Chryssavgis, John.** *In the Heart of the Desert*. Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, Inc., 2003. An excellent summary of the desert fathers from a Greek Orthodox perspective.
- Cowart, John.** *People Whose Faith Got Them into Trouble*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990. Great stories about historical holy fools such as Saint Patrick, Mary Slessor, and Hudson Taylor.
- Foster, Richard J.** *Celebration of Discipline*. San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978. The classic work on spiritual disciplines.
- Green, Joel B., and Mark D. Baker.** *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000. A good resource that explains the New Testament’s teaching on the folly of the Cross.
- Hengel, Martin.** *Crucifixion*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977. A superb, scholarly overview of crucifixions in the ancient world.
- Kierkegaard, Søren.** *Provocations*. Compiled and edited by Charles E. Moore. Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 2002. Kierkegaard challenges us to reject mediocre faith and live passionately for Christ. Contains parables, essays, quotes, and prayers.
- Lane, Belden.** *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. A theological treatise on desert spirituality.

**Merton, Thomas.** *Contemplative Prayer*. New York: Image Books, 1969.  
A slim though profound volume on the nature of contemplative prayer and the presence of Christ.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Thoughts in Solitude*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1958.  
This book is still relevant to our need for solitude in a hectic culture.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Wisdom of the Desert*. New York: New Directions Books, 1970.  
Contains quotes and stories from the desert fathers. The introduction explains the motivation and beauty of the desert movement.

**Nomura, Yushi.** *Desert Wisdom*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982. A collection of quotes and stories from the desert fathers, including moving drawings and a fine introduction by Henri Nouwen.

**Nouwen, Henri.** *The Way of the Heart*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1983.  
As always, Nouwen is gentle, challenging, and practical all at once. This is a wonderful overview of desert spirituality.

**Rolheiser, Ronald.** *The Shattered Lantern*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001. One of the best books on contemplative prayer I've read. Rolheiser helps us understand contemplation and how culture prevents us from experiencing God's presence.

**Vanier, Jean.** *From Brokenness to Community*. New York: Paulist Press, 1992. A beautiful little book consisting of two lectures delivered at Harvard. A profound meditation on God's power in our weakness.

**Waddell, Helen,** trans. *The Desert Fathers*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. One of the classic collections of stories and quotes from the desert fathers. Includes a fine introduction from Basil Pennington.

**Ward, Benedicta.** *The Desert Fathers*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.  
A classic collection of sayings from the desert fathers; arranged by topic.

**Willard, Dallas.** *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988. This book offers a vision for the *spirit* of the disciplines—not just what they are, but how they work in our lives.

# Notes

## Holy Fools: The Ants in Our Spiritual Pants

1. The desert fathers and mothers were a loosely organized group of Christ followers that arose in the fourth century after Christ. They were inspired by a man named Antony, the first desert father, who left his comfortable home and settled deep in the wildness of the desert. Although he spent much of his time in prayer and Scripture reading, Antony also had a vibrant ministry of compassion, healing, mentoring, and teaching that touched the lives of thousands around him. Within forty years of Antony's death (around 356), the movement of desert spirituality began to blossom as men and women abandoned a compromised church culture in order to seek God and build community in the wilderness. Some of them lived alone; others joined into small bands of community with organized structure and leadership. Some pushed their spiritual practices into a morbid direction, while many maintained a balanced but challenging approach to spiritual disciplines.
2. John Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 10.

## Chapter 1: Discovering God's Ragged Children

1. The great Jewish theologian A. J. Heschel once commented on the prophets: His images must not shine, they must burn. . . . His words are often slashing, even horrid—designed to shock rather than to edify. *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 8.
2. If you want to find out more about the early desert Christians, I've included at the end of this book a list of sources that have been helpful to me in learning about their adventures in holy folly—and embarking on my own.

3. I am indebted to Wendy Wright for this original idea—although I did see the same billboard when I was growing up in Minnesota.
4. This comment was made by a pagan philosopher named Porphyry in his ancient work *Against the Christians*. It is quoted in Thomas Molnar, *The Pagan Temptation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 27.
5. The classic study on this topic was written by a German scholar named Martin Hengel in his book *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). He describes crucifixion as a “barbaric form of execution of utmost cruelty”—the supreme Roman penalty that was reserved for “rebellious foreigners, violent criminals, and robbers.” Hengel helps us put crucifixion in its proper historical context: “The cross was not just a matter of indifference, just any kind of death. It was an utterly offensive affair, ‘obscene’ in the original sense of the word” (page 22).
6. We don’t know for sure the nature of what happened here. We do know that this kind of contact between a man—especially a Jewish man who was also a rabbi—and a woman was highly inappropriate, crossing boundaries of sexual propriety. And yet Jesus allowed it. The text does not say why he allowed something so blatantly inappropriate to happen, but I have a hunch that Jesus knew she was loving him the only way that she knew how to love him.

## Chapter 2: Subverting Self-Righteousness

1. I guess Clive paved the way for me on this one! Following C. S. Lewis, I’m using *damn* in its theological rather than its frivolous sense. Our seriousness can wrap us so tightly in a web of self-righteousness that the spiritual life literally gets sucked out of us. We become mere husks, perhaps even spiritually damned husks, of spiritual men and women.
2. Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 33–34.
3. To find out more about Romuald, see John Saward, *Perfect Fools* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 49–51.
4. Quoted in Thomas C. Peters, *The Christian Imagination* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 124.