

The Deacon as Wise Fool: A Pastoral Persona for the Diaconate

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Deacons often sit with the hurt and marginalized. It is in keeping with our ordination vows as deacons in the Episcopal Church, which say, “God now calls you to a special ministry of servanthood. . . . You are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely.”¹

Ever task focused, deacons look for the tangible and concrete things we can do to respond to the needs of the least of Jesus’ brothers and sisters (Matt. 25:40). But once the food is served, the money given, the medicine dispensed, then what? The material needs are supplied, but the hurt and the trauma are still very much present. What kind of pastoral care can deacons bring that will respond to the needs of the hurting and traumatized?

I suggest that, if we as deacons are going to be sources of continued pastoral care beyond being simple providers of material needs, we need to look to the pastoral model of the wise fool for guidance. With some exceptions here and there, deacons are uniquely fit to practice the pastoral persona of the wise fool.

The wise fool is a clinical pastoral persona most identified and developed by the pastoral theologians Alastair V. Campbell and Donald Capps. The fool is an archetype in human culture that both Campbell and Capps view as someone capable of rendering pastoral care. In his essay “The Wise Fool,”² Campbell describes the fool as a “necessary figure” to counterpoint human arrogance, pomposity, and despotism: “His unruly behavior questions the limits of order; his ‘crazy’ outspoken talk probes the meaning of ‘common sense’; his unconventional appearance exposes the pride and vanity of those around

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¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (n.p.: Seabury Press, 1979), 543.

² Alastair V. Campbell, “The Wise Fool,” in Robert C. Dykstra, ed., *Images of Pastoral Care* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2005), 94.

him; his foolhardy loyalty to a 'lost' cause undercuts prudence and self-interest."³

Building on a concept from Heiji Faber a decade earlier, Campbell elevates the unskilled circus clown, running and stumbling among the skilled circus performers, to the shrewd critic and prophet of Shakespeare's court jester in *King Lear*, who perceives the folly of others through unfiltered eyes, calling them out with the satire of the double entendre. The circus clown calls for laughs with his ineptitude, the wise fool's "ineptitude" belies his call for insight. It is this supposed ineptitude that grants the wise fool his unusual authority. Campbell codifies the wise fool with three dominant traits: simplicity, loyalty, and prophecy.

Simplicity. The wise fool is neither stupid nor a simpleton, but a person without artifice or overweened complexity. Some of the best examples of a person with simplicity are found in literature, such as Lear's court jester mentioned above or Prince Myshkin in Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot*. Whereas the court jester mocks the foibles of ego and vanity, Myshkin's simplicity of manner exposes the insincerities and cynicism of his community. The jester hopes to shame his community back to rightness of living, the prince offers his community a way back to their true selves by modeling his way of life.⁴

Both fools are able to see through the errors and sins of common existence with their unique reframe of life, a reframe that does not come from education, training, or certification, but a purity of heart. Capps puts it well in his essay, "The Wise Fool Reframed," when he says, "Wise fools tend to see problems as much less intricate and complicated. Truth is remarkably simple. Errors and falsity are unnecessarily complex."⁵

Loyalty. The wise fool's willingness to disregard self for the benefit of others, even when there is no benefit to the fool, is an enigma to most people. Lear's fool followed him into total exile and poverty when everyone else had abandoned him. Blind loyalty and love are at the center of Jesus' death on the cross, and such sacrifice is often found at the heart of his teachings—to deny oneself, take up one's cross, and follow him, with zero worldly guarantee that what Jesus

³ Campbell, "The Wise Fool," 95.

⁴ Campbell, "The Wise Fool," 97.

⁵ Donald Capps, "The Wise Fool Reframed," in Dykstra, *Images of Pastoral Care*, 115.

promised in exchange was anything but delusion. Campbell says of loyalty, “All the fools for Christ’s sake can know is that to be true to themselves they must try to be loyal to Christ, and that must mean putting love and service to others first in line.”⁶

Prophecy. The more engaging, robust aspect of the fool is that of prophecy—not a prophet that foretells, but as a forth-teller: pointing to the signs of the times and proclaiming divine revelation about them. As vital as simplicity and loyalty are to the persona of the fool, they are passive in nature. Speaking prophetically, in contrast, is an action that demands the attention of friend and foe alike. The fool as prophet has the audacity to call out her cultural superiors for their mendacity, cruelty, or heartlessness. This requires both courage and faith. The fool as prophet often speaks truth to power, but also truth to apathy, or truth to inertia. Speaking from the margins of society, the fool sometimes employs drama, or satire, or odd behavior. Campbell says, “The whole point of prophecy is that it does not fit in with the ‘common sense’ assumptions of the day. It cuts cross-grained to earthly powers and authority, announcing God’s judgment upon it.”⁷

Capps warns us of the dangers of prophecy: buffoonery and satire can often be heartless, weapons to protect the perpetrator against any genuine human involvement.⁸ As essential as satire and humor are to the persona of the fool, they cannot be allowed to degenerate to ridicule—ridicule is rooted in humiliation, which is soul killing. Wise fools are in the business of appealing to the soul, not killing it. Capps shows that to inoculate oneself from this pitfall, the truly wise fool understands that human life is not hopelessly complex or profound, but paradoxical to the core. A wise fool is one who sees the paradox of her own life as clearly as she sees it in others. She speaks not only about her community, but herself as well, sharing in the sting of prophecy.

With this brief description of the wise fool in mind, how does it comport with the vocation of the deacon? I suggest that deacons, by virtue of their formation and clerical parameters of authority, fit the pastoral persona of the wise fool quite well.

Simplicity. Generally, deacons are not educated in seminaries or schools of theology, but rather diocesan schools created specifically for deacons and lay ministers, called Episcopal Schools of Ministry

⁶ Capps, “The Wise Fool Reframed,” 100.

⁷ Campbell, “The Wise Fool,” 102.

⁸ Capps, “The Wise Fool Reframed,” 119.

(ESM). Graduates from these institutes receive no MDiv, masters degree, or CPE certification. Many deacons are well educated, but not in the same way or depth as a priest. If a deacon receives formal pastoral education at all, it is usually Unit One of a CPE program and that is all. Like Faber's circus clown persona, we appear to be the *unskilled performer* among the high-wire acts of the rest of the clergy.

What's more, a deacon does not bring any ecclesial authority to a pastoral relationship that a priest can bring—deacons do not have any authority, only duty. Whereas a priest possesses the faculties to absolve, bless, and consecrate, the deacon has none of these. One time I was asked by a nephew to perform his wedding, and when I informed him that I did not have the authority to perform the ceremony, he blinked in confusion and said, "Well . . . then what good are you?"

Not only does a deacon lack the faculties of a priest, but we will never be rector or priest in charge, never be a bishop, or never sit on a vestry, by virtue of our ordination vows. Ecclesiastically, we are *powerless*.

Deacons do bring to the table a lifetime of lived experience, as deacons often commence their vocational careers later in life than most priests, and many of us have degrees and training useful to our ministries. For the most part, though, there is a simplicity in the making of a deacon that personifies the wise fool as the *unskilled, amateur volunteer*.

Loyalty. A deacon is nonstipendiary in the Episcopal Church—she works for free. As such, there is no financial interest that compels her dedication and loyalty to her duty—only love of God and God's people. As nonprofessionals, we have no employment contract, only a Letter of Agreement with the rector that spells out some duties and a weekly schedule. There is no salary, no benefits, no insurance, and no paid time off. The priestly vocation is both a vocation and a profession, as it should be; the deacon's vocation is vocation only. It is fidelity to the vocation and our vows that motivate us in our work.

As we only have duties—neither authority nor benefits—we see the duties as rewards themselves. In the examination of a candidate for the order of deacon, it lists our special ministry of servanthood toward the poor, as well as the study of scripture, modeling a life of redemptive love, assisting in the worship of the community.⁹ This is pure loyalty, bereft of any self-interest. As the bishop asks the candidate in

⁹ *Book of Common Prayer*, 543.

the liturgy for ordination, “Will you in all things seek not your glory but the glory of the Lord Christ?”¹⁰

Such selflessness is contrary to the value-for-value exchange so honored and sought after in modern society, and it is an enigma to most people.

Prophecy. Of the various duties the deacon carries, one that stands out among the others, one that seems contrary to the humility of the first two, is the duty of prophet. In the examination of the ordination liturgy, the bishop commands the candidate, “You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.”¹¹

As forth-tellers, deacons speak on behalf of the marginalized and voiceless, calling upon the greater church to render love, compassion, and justice to those living in the margins. Deacons speak from a unique position of prophecy, based on their own personal experience living among those who they serve. Our moral imagination, as described by the Rev. Peter J. Gomes,¹² allows us to flip the frame described in our vows, requiring that the deacon also bring to the *world* the needs, concerns, and the hopes of the *church*.

A growing segment of society and its representatives regard the poor not as people of pity, or people exploited and abused, but objects of scorn; their poverty and oppression are their own fault and they are to be punished for it. Two recent statements by U.S. senators are examples. Chuck Grassley of Iowa, in speaking about eliminating the estate tax, said, “I think not having the estate tax recognizes the people that are investing, as opposed to those that are just spending every darn penny they have, whether it’s on booze or women or movies.” His associate, Orin Hatch of Utah, said regarding defunding the Children’s Health Insurance Program, “I believe in helping those who cannot help themselves but would if they could. I have a rough time wanting to spend billions and trillions of dollars to help people who won’t help themselves, won’t lift a finger and expect the federal government to do everything.”¹³ Such are the attitudes of U.S. senators regarding the less fortunate and sick children; it is indicative of an entire movement in society toward the poor. As the church is one of

¹⁰ *Book of Common Prayer*, 544.

¹¹ *Book of Common Prayer*, 543.

¹² Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1996), 86.

¹³ CNN.com, “Two Quotes from GOP Senators Explain the GOP Tax Bill,” Gregory Krieg, Dec. 4, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/04/politics/chuck-grassley-orrin-hatch-explain-republican-tax-cuts/index.html>.

the few institutions left to see this for the perversion it is, the deacon is to speak forth to the world as much as to the church, calling it out and calling it to its better nature. The deacon, therefore, must always speak *prophetically*.

By virtue of deacons' natural simplicity, loyalty, and prophetic voice, they fit the persona of the wise fool quite well. They are the amateur volunteers with no authority; they are the noncompensated servants who serve out of selfless love; they are those who speak forth from the margins, to disturb, educate, and motivate.

If we were to search for a concrete example of the deacon as the wise fool, we need not look any further than St. Francis of Assisi. Francis (1182–1226) was the founder of the Friars Minor in 1209, whose brotherhood was approved that same year by Pope Innocent III. Innocent granted the brotherhood authority to preach and wear the tonsure. Francis himself was ordained a deacon sometime thereafter.

The history of Francis fits perfectly with the three hallmarks of the wise fool. He had no formal training as a cleric. His spirituality was self-discovered through prayer and reading of the New Testament; he was without artifice and had a reputation for a pure heart. He was not a paid cleric. Francis embraced what he called Lady Poverty, living by the work of his own hands or by begging alms; his dedication to his vocation was based on love, not careerism. He was granted authority to preach. He became a street preacher and often a critic of his own society; he was one of the first church figures to openly criticize the Crusades; he called upon his community to pacifism; he did all this not from the palace of a cardinal, but from the streets and alleys of the towns and villages, that is, from the margins.

During his lifetime, he was identified as “God’s Troubadour,” or “God’s Clown,” or “God’s Fool.” His “Admonitions” are filled with the simplicity, humility, and insight of the wise fool, summarized in his famous slogan: “What a man is before God, that he is and nothing more.”¹⁴

Yet, from this persona of God’s fool came rivers of good will and wisdom that have flowed into the world for over eight centuries now. It has called people to repentance, reformation, and reconciliation, as well as simplicity, mercy, peace, and justice.

¹⁴ Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady, *Francis and Clare—The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 33.

All this has a direct bearing on how a deacon can bring pastoral care as the wise fool to those he or she serves.

Like Francis, the deacon offers pastoral care not face-to-face like a professional counselor, but side-by-side as the deacon lives and works among the people she serves, sharing their lives and modeling the call to be their better selves as disciples of Jesus. By our presence and our simple openness, we can be what Capps calls “agents of hope”¹⁵ and introduce people to their tomorrows. Like Francis, the deacon does not bring great professional training or expertise to the table, but rather great personal life experience and deep formation from the “school of prayer.” Like Francis, the deacon is without worldly compensation, but is rich in the grace that abounds when hearts with pure intention seek out the hurting and forgotten. Like Francis, the deacon preaches the gospel and prophecies to the world, calling it to a better way of life. The deacon not only speaks truth to power from the margins, but also truth to apathy, truth to inertia, and hope to a hurting world. As Capps says, “The simple fool carries no baggage when another seeks help, no technique, no ‘pastoral medicine bag.’ When pretense is stripped aside, all we fools have to offer one another is a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything. Few of us manage to be so foolish.”¹⁶

Francis could only speak like he did from the powerlessness of the margins, like the wise fool he was—he saw the emptiness of wealth, for he had experienced the emptiness of wealth; the folly of war and violence for he had experienced the folly of war and violence; the corruption of power because he had experienced the corruption of power. Francis was no concrete garden statue standing among the rose bushes in the back yard. He was a world-weary wise fool who saw the paradox of life and all the humor therein. Francis laughed at the paradox of life, and cried as often as he laughed.

Deacons would do well to consider and study the pastoral model of the wise fool in the life of their vocation. There is much to learn and use there.

¹⁵ Donald Capps, “The Agent of Hope,” in Dykstra, *Images of Pastoral Care*, 188.

¹⁶ Campbell, “The Wise Fool,” 105.

