

Don't be ridiculous: Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

by [John Ortberg](#) in the [August 9, 2003](#) issue

In Garrison Keillor's mythical Lake Wobegon, Pastor Ingqvist is alarmed when he glances at Dear Abby columns and notices how often she refers her readers to ministers. Talk to your minister, Abby counsels a 14-year-old deeply in love with a 50-something married man serving serious time in a federal penitentiary.

. . . as she pours out her love for Vince, her belief in his innocence, the fact that his wife never loved him . . . not like she, Trish, can love him, and the fact that despite his age and their never having met except in letters, there is something indescribably sacred and precious between them; all the pastor can think is: "You're crazy. Don't be ridiculous."

Thou shalt not be ridiculous. Paul says, "See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil." When Paul wrote that wonderful sentence he probably was sitting in an upper room in Athens. It was late at night, quiet, and all the fools were asleep. He could write the simple truth, and no fool was around to say, "Huh? What do you mean? Are you saying I shouldn't go for the world long-distance walking-backward record? But I can do it! I can walk backward for miles."

One of the marks of the human condition is that it is not simply depraved or lost; it is also ridiculous. Paul says that as we relate to each other we are to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, making melody to the Lord in our hearts and giving thanks to God at all times. But even in the church we end up spending more time fighting about the kind of melodies we should sing, and whether the Lord God prefers organ or guitar. People split churches over how loudly the songs should be amplified. We are ridiculous.

Things are no better outside. Imagine what the world might be like if CEOs of large corporations would go into Watts or Cabrini Green and sing and make melody in their hearts. Or if Israelis and Palestinians spent a day singing psalms and hymns to one another. When we are alone at night and all the fools are asleep, it is not hard to imagine such a world. But why does it remain so ridiculously remote?

Of course, folly in the tradition of ancient wisdom literature involves something more tragic than wasting energy trying to get into the *Guinness Book of Records*. Foolishness, in this way of thinking, is not so much a disease of the intellect as of the will. The fool says in her heart that there is no God; or that she will live as god, which is perhaps the same thing. The fool thinks he needs bigger barns for the riches that he in his cleverness has accumulated, and forgets that the night when his construction project is finished is the night he has scheduled a massive coronary. You can be a fool and still find good work in Cambridge, Massachusetts, or on Madison Avenue. Sometimes it helps.

Paul said of fools: "Their god is their stomach." They have a philosophy of life that was perhaps best articulated by *Sesame Street's* Cookie Monster: "See cookie. Want cookie. Absorb cookie. Seek ye first the cookie." Some of the highest-IQ people in our world stay up late at night trying to find new ways to convince us that we are nothing more than a collection of appetites. See. Want. Absorb. What would Paul say to a society whose magazine covers feature well-coiffed, aerobicized versions of the Cookie Monster? "Thou shalt not be ridiculous."

Scholars tell us that the ancient Hebrews had a fierce appetite for wisdom. They loved wisdom so much that they spoke of her as a person: Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? . . . Listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways . . . For whoever finds me finds life." They hoped for the coming of wisdom as we hope for the resurrection of the NASDAQ.

Then wisdom became a person. He came so that hungry people and thirsty people could finally be filled. (To be hungry and thirsty, Dallas Willard writes, is to be driven by unsatisfied desires. We live in a hungry world.) Wisdom was born in a manger and died on a cross, and in between said that our only shot at ever being filled up is if we follow him in the life of self-emptying love. He said that our only hope for being filled is to be filled with him, to absorb him, to follow in the way of the one who emptied himself and thus became the fullness of all things. See Jesus. Want Jesus. Absorb Jesus.

Paul said for such people a new kind of fullness is possible. "Don't get drunk with wine"—Don't consider yourself a giant appetite to be gratified . . . but "be filled with the Spirit." I grew up in circles where we stayed far away from wine, and were not all that sure about the Spirit. But it is in the Spirit where true fullness lies, in "the shy member of the Trinity," as Dale Bruner says, the member who is always pointing

beyond himself. The fullness of the Spirit comes only when we are emptied of all the ego and self-preoccupation that promises so much and delivers so little; emptied of all that is foolish and dying and ridiculous. It is the Spirit that Jesus was so full of that the life came spilling out of him as well.

Be careful how you live . . .