

Foolhardy faith: Acts 17:22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-22

by [Michael W. Spangler](#) in the [April 21, 1999](#) issue

Just where Lenin Avenue makes a turn, coming out of downtown Moscow and heading out toward the southwest suburbs, stands St. Nicholas's Church.

The first sight of St. Nicholas's is like a friendly ambush by a clown jumping out to surprise you, all dressed up in orange and green and white. Against the gray and tan background of apartment blocks and walled courtyards no one can miss it. It seems ready for a party, its small onion domes golden sparklers, its tepee-shaped tower a big candle.

Some years ago I turned off the busy avenue, parked and, with my camera around my neck, walked to the gate of the St. Nicholas compound. It was midmorning and there were a few women and an old bearded man sitting on benches inside the compound wall. A couple of women were sweeping, bent over, with short straw brooms.

As I pushed the gate open and started lining up my first photo of the church, I saw in the corner of my eye someone rushing toward me. I turned, and there, almost bumping up against me, blocking my way, was an elderly woman in black, who ordered me to go away. They didn't want people like me coming to take snapshots, making fun of their church and their faith.

In bad Russian I protested that I wasn't making fun of them, that I only wanted some pictures so I could show others how beautiful the church was. And besides, I was a pastor myself, a believer like them.

Still pushing me back toward the gate, she hissed: "Where is your beard then, priest? And your boots?"--which any Russian Orthodox priest would be wearing.

I thought my visit was over.

And then from nowhere came another woman, even smaller and older, who hustled in, elbowed the first woman aside, and said, "Welcome! We're glad you came. Isn't our church beautiful? I hope you'll take pictures to show your friends. Please come

inside and let me show you some of our precious icons. And I will tell you about our church."

Upon reflection, I understood the sentiments of the first woman. Why wouldn't she be afraid of ridicule, tired of intimidation, and quick to retaliate? Thousands of believers had been put to death, hundreds of churches destroyed--her generation had endured enormous suffering. I had seen vestiges of that experience of suffering in the gauntlets of jeering spectators outside churches on Easter morning. So it was natural for her to keep the gate shut, and no longer play the fool.

How unaccountably gracious then was the second woman's hospitality. She was of the same generation as the first woman, yet her response was the opposite. "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence." It was hardly a defense at all. It was just a warm and undeserved welcome, a door opened into her life and faith.

Luke writes that when Paul had finished speaking at the Areopagus, some scoffed. It's amazing that Paul had the nerve to stand up and say anything at all. Why did he feel compelled to look silly and risk ridicule? Why did he go to synagogues and marketplaces, vulnerable to scorn and worse?

The writer of 1 Peter seems to know why: "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God." Paul, once a specialist in anti-Christian scorn and murder, had now been invited to share in Christ's sufferings. And he welcomed the privilege.

This Eastertide I have not experienced overt ridicule of my faith. No one has scoffed at my Easter sermons. The Easter eggs have been eaten, not thrown. But for the most part I've spoken of my faith only to those who share it. Most of those who've come through the church doors have been there many times before. No one has appeared with a camera to document our quaint Presbyterian rituals; not a single visitor has laughed out loud at our alleluias.

I know it would be different if I ventured "outdoors," if I attended a city council meeting and said a word for the poor, if I stood up at Rotary Club with a petition against capital punishment. Then I might hear a scoff or two. Then I might have the opportunity to give my account of the hope and faith that, untested, I think I hold dear.

Then I might gain some practical understanding of what Paul was saying to the Corinthians: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong."

Across a quarter-century I have remembered vividly the two women of St. Nicholas's Church. I appeared at their gate, obviously American, obviously well-off and privileged, completely "other." One of them was tired of playing the fool for Christ, and could not see in me a possible brother in Christ. The other woman was alive with a graceful and welcoming spirit, and seemed to count it an honor to be Christ's fool.

And I remember vividly the gaudy facade, so different from the solemn dark red brick building that houses my pulpit. My church has straight lines, it's regular and reasonable--a very foolproof building. People don't laugh when they see it.