

Message for December 24, 2017 (Advent4B/Christmas Eve Morning) “The Clown of God”
(*This morning, Pastor Holly shared Tomi diPaola's version of this old Italian folktale.*)
(*Readings this Sunday: Luke 1:26-38, 46-55; Luke 2:1-20*)

Many, many years ago, in Sorrento, there lived a small beggar boy named Giovanni. He had no mother and no father. He begged his bread and slept in doorways. But he was happy, and he could do something wonderful: he could juggle.

Every day he would go to Signor Baptista's fruit and vegetable stand, and he would juggle: lemons, oranges, apples, eggplants, even zucchini! Crowds would gather to watch, and when he was done, they would buy from Signor Baptista. Then Signor Baptista's wife would give him a bowl of hot noodles. It was a very good arrangement.

One day, a troupe of travelling players came to town. Giovanni watched as Arlecchino and Columbina danced and sang in their beautiful costumes. “Oh,” said Giovanni, “that is the life for me!” When the play was over, he went and talked to the Maestro. “I have no need of a ragamuffin,” he said. “Go beg your bread somewhere else.”

“But, Maestro, I could be very helpful!” pleaded Giovanni, “I could help pack and unpack, I could take care of the donkey, and—Maestro—I can juggle!” “Not bad,” said the Maestro. “With a bit more training and practice... alright. But no money. A place to sleep, a bowl of noodles, and the companionship of the finest players in Italy... Pack your things. We leave in an hour.” “Grazie, Signor!” said Giovanni.

He said goodbye to Signor and Signora Baptista, and left with the players. Soon after, the Maestro gave him a costume and Giovanni juggled for the crowds. He would put on a clown face, step out from behind the curtain, roll out a carpet, bow, and begin. He would juggle sticks, then plates, then balance the plates on the sticks and twirl them, then juggle clubs, rings, and burning torches. Finally he would toss a red ball, then an orange ball, then a yellow ball, green, blue, and violet until it looked like he was juggling a rainbow. And then, still juggling, he would pick up a shining golden ball. “And now, for the sun in the heavens!” he would cry, and toss it higher & higher, faster & faster, and how the crowds would cheer!

Giovanni's fame grew, and it wasn't long before he set off on his own and travelled the

land. Once he juggled for a duke. Once, for a king! His costume became more beautiful, but the act stayed the same: sticks, then plates, then the plates on the sticks, then rings, clubs, and burning torches. Then, the rainbow of balls, “And now, for the sun in the heavens!” he would cry, and the balls would go higher & higher, faster & faster, and the crowds would laugh and clap and cheer!

One day, Giovanni was eating his lunch beside a brook, in the shade of a tree. Two little brothers, monks from a nearby monastery, came down the road. “Will you share your lunch with us, for the love of God and the blessing of our Brother Francis?” they asked.

“Certainly,” said Giovanni. There's more than enough.” As the three men ate, the brothers told Giovanni how they went from town to town, begging their bread and sharing the love of God. “Our founder, Brother Francis, says that everything sings to the glory of God. Why, even your juggling!” “That's all well and good for men like you,” said Giovanni, “but I only juggle to make people laugh & applaud.” “It's the same thing, said the brothers. “When you make people laugh, you give glory to God as well.” “If you say so,” said Giovanni. “And now I must be off to the next town. Arrivaderci, and good luck!”

Wherever Giovanni went, the air was filled with flying sticks, plates, and burning torches, and always the rainbow of colored balls, and the sun in the heavens. And wherever Giovanni went, the crowd would be all smiles, and the sound of laughter and cheers would ring through the air.

Years passed. Times became hard, and people no longer stopped to watch. “It's only the old clown who juggles things. We've all seen him before.” Giovanni was sad, but he still juggled—until one day, he *dropped* the sun in the heavens, and the rainbow of colored balls came crashing down. The crowd stood around & laughed, but not from joy. Then they did a terrible thing: they threw vegetables & stones at Giovanni, so that he had to run for his life.

Beside a stream, Giovanni took off his clown face. He put away his sticks and his plates, his clubs, rings, and colored balls. He put away his costume, and gave up juggling forever. What little money he had was soon gone, and he begged his bread and slept in doorways, as he had as a child. “It's time to go home,” the old man said wearily. And he headed back to Sorrento.

It was a cold, winter night when he finally arrived. The wind blew hard, & an icy rain was falling. Up ahead loomed the monastery church of the Little Brothers. The windows were in darkness. Wet and cold, Giovanni crept inside, and fell asleep in a doorway.

It was the music that woke him up. The church was blazing with candlelight and filled with people singing, “Gloria! Gloria!” Giovanni could scarcely believe his eyes. So much *beauty!* A long procession of brothers, priests, sisters, and towns-people, all carrying beautiful gifts, was winding its way through the church. They placed their gifts in front of a statue of a lady and her child. “What is all this?” asked old Giovanni of someone standing near. “Why, old man, it's the birthday of the holy child. It's the procession of gifts.”

Giovanni watched in amazement until the singing was over. Then the church emptied of all the people, and it was dark, except for the bright candles around the statue of the lady and child. Giovanni moved closer. The child in the lady's arms was so serious, so stern. “Oh, lady, I wish I had something to offer too. Your child seems so sad, even with all those beautiful gifts. But wait, I used to make people smile.” Giovanni opened his bag, and shook out his old costume. Then he put on his clown face and rolled out his rug. He took out his juggling things, and began. First the sticks, then the plates, then he twirled the plates on the sticks, then the clubs, rings, and burning torches.

The brother sexton, coming in to lock up the building, saw the old clown juggling, and was horrified. “Father master, a sacrilege! Come quickly!” But Giovanni didn't hear or notice him. “And now,” he said, smiling at the statue of the child, “first the red ball, then the orange, the yellow, green, blue, and violet...” around & up they went, till they looked like a rainbow. “And finally, the sun in the heavens!” The gold ball flew up and around and around, higher and higher. Giovanni had never juggled so well in all his life. Higher and higher, faster and faster, a blaze of color filled the air. It was magnificent. His heart was pounding. “For you, sweet child, for you!” he cried.

Then, suddenly, his old heart stopped. Giovanni fell dead to the floor. The priest and the brother sexton came running in. Stooping over Giovanni's body, the priest said, “Why, the poor clown is dead. May his soul rest in peace.”

But the brother sexton backed away, with his mouth open, and stared at the statue of the lady and the child. “Oh, father!” he said, pointing. “Oh, father, look!” The child was smiling. And in his hand, he held the golden ball.

*--Retold by Rev. Holly S. Morrison, pastor
Phippsburg Congregational Church, UCC
Phippsburg, Maine*