

Paradox and Irony

Did you see the news the other day when Vladimir Putin said:

"A man has no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends," referring to the invading Russian troops?

Quoting Jesus in defense of his indefensible war in Ukraine.

He's not alone in misusing Scripture and faith to justify human arrogance.

Remember all the "Jesus" signs at the January 6 insurrection?

White supremacists also shamelessly tout their supposed belief in Christianity.

It seems that we all want to have God on our side, whatever side that may be.

But as Lincoln correctly observed: "My concern is, am I on God's side?"

Our faith, and the scripture that guides it, is holy and ancient and profound because it meets us in the complexity and messiness of our everyday lives.

And in that meeting, challenges who we are and how we act.

So it comes as no surprise that scripture is very often not what it seems at first glance.

It's less a rule book for life than a deeply ironic reminder of how different God's ways are from our ways.

In fact, God seems to get a kick out of upending our expectations so that just when we think we've figured it all out, lo and behold, something completely unexpected happens!

Today, the unexpected begins with Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

You know Mary!

We first meet her sitting quietly with Jesus, while Martha rushes around getting dinner ready.

And when Martha the attentive host wants Mary to help out, Jesus upends expectations, insisting that Mary is right where she needs to be.

So much for good manners!

Today, unproductive Mary blows 300 denarii, a year's pay, on perfume!

Imagine your unemployed sister popping a hugely expensive bottle of wine for her pal - because her pal's days are numbered!

But this time, it's not Martha going ballistic.

It's Judas!

Judas, apparently forgetting that just last week Jesus fed 5000 hungry people with a few loaves and fish — wants to sell Mary's perfume to feed the poor.

And perhaps because St John is worried that we'll take Judas' supposed concern for the poor at face value, he whispers in our ear:

"Judas is a thief."

It seems the guy entrusted with the community purse, has itchy fingers.

As the irony continues.

Because Jesus is here to save the lost; and who is more lost than Judas?

Will God's grace ensnare even God's betrayer?

Then there's our old friend Lazarus, who just days ago lay rotting in the grave.

The irony being that because Lazarus is raised to life, the religious big shots decide to put Jesus to death.

By freeing Lazarus from the grave, Jesus condemns himself to the grave.

You'll remember the scheming that went on in high places after Lazarus stumbles out from the land of the dead.

That's when Caiaphas, the chief priest, says the infamous words:

"It's better for one man to die than the whole nation be destroyed."

Which drips with its own irony, since, in Jesus' death, not only the nation, but the whole world — is saved.

Lazarus is raised from the dead by Jesus.

A sign demonstrating that, in God, there is only life.

And yet, Caiaphas, the high priest of God, is plotting to kill the ultimate sign of God's love, Jesus.

And if all of this is giving you a headache, just wait till Jesus moves from irony to paradox.

"If you want to be first, be last."

"Die in order to live."

These are not obvious truths.

Which is why we don't interpret scripture, as much as scripture interprets us.

These paradoxes of Jesus are intended to shake us up.

Allowing us to glimpse something of the majesty and awe of God.

And yet that majesty and awe is itself full of paradox.

When St John tells us about the glory of Jesus, he means Jesus hanging from the cross!

For John, the judgment of God isn't condemnation or rejection – it's compassion and love.

It's undeserved mercy.

Irony and paradox continue in the tomb after Jesus is killed.

You expect that after the resurrection, Jesus is done with his work.

He'll return to the realm of his Father!

But as our Apostles Creed says, when he's raised, he doesn't go up, he goes down!

Straight to hell!

“Where the unthinkable happens, because God’s love reaches to the deepest depths, to the most undeserving, reminding us that God is present in all creation.

That while we may lose touch with God, God forever is holding us tight.” J. Shea, *Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels*, C, p. 105, modified.

Paradox and irony refuse easy answers, because the answers that matter are never easy.

Paradox and irony tell us that the answers to the really important questions cannot be known, at least not on our terms.

And that’s exactly what Paul is saying today, as he begs us to resist the temptation to know all the answers.

Because, when he knew all the answers, he killed the people of God.

With a clean conscience!

Until God knocks him down and opens his eyes.

For Paul, the great debate was whether rules about circumcision should keep people out of the church.

Today, the great debate is whether the rules concerning people of certain sexual orientations should keep people out of the church.

Or whether one's gender should keep one from ministry.

Or whether certain kinds of failures are unforgivable.

Paul loved his rules, as we do, "until, on his way to Damascus, all fired up to demonstrate his zeal for God, God knocks him on his keister, and gives him a long timeout to reconsider his entire approach." Feasting on the Word, C2, p. 137, paraphrased.

Paul comes to see that all his rule following isn't worth a pile of -- skybala - (in the Greek), and, yes, it does mean what you think it means.

Because once he lets go of all that skybala, what Paul comes to see, what Mary sees everyday, what Judas never sees this side of the grave, what those who use scripture to advance their political agenda never see, is that God is the gracious giver.

Who rejects all violence.

Who will go anywhere and everywhere to embrace every last human being.

And so, to follow Jesus means becoming gracious givers.

Even when the giving isn't returned.

Even when it's undeserved.

And there is this.

We are invited to recognize that it's not us, but the power of God, made strong in our weakness, that transforms our lives.

It means questioning easy answers.

Rejecting the airtight cases so many make when telling us about the who and what of God.

It means identifying and then letting go of old angers.

Old hurts.

Old resentments.

Jesus invites us into the deep.

Even when that means we won't have all the answers.

Even when the way forward seems murky and uncertain.

In some ways, it's the contrast between Judas and Mary.

Mary gives all she has to Jesus.

The expensive ointment, poured over his feet.

Wiped with her hair.

A beautiful, even sensual moment.

So odd in a culture where a woman's hair remains braided and concealed.

Yet today fully arrayed, spreading the scent of precious oils.

She places all of her life in his service.

Asking for nothing in return.

And there is Judas, rejecting the gift.

Reducing the fragrance of pure love into cold, lifeless, cash.

Money for the poor is not a bad thing.

Wanting God to be on our side is not a bad thing.

But they are examples of how the good can often be the enemy of the best.

Of how we so often try to control God, rather than surrendering to God.

But if we will take the risk, if we will jump, trusting that the net will appear, then he will take us to places of sublime joy, and infinite wonder.

As our lives unfold, in paradox and irony.

+amen