

Into the Deep

As many of you know, some of us held a quiet vigil awhile ago at the State Capitol.

We were there because the Rev. Franklin Graham was in town, promoting a thing he calls Christianity, but which is so far removed from our historical understanding of the faith as to be something all together different.

Naturally, our presence stirred up some comments from those who see Jesus as a punishing, "us vs. them," "most folks are going to hell" kind of savior.

There was the anonymous letter that I found slipped under the church door that had a number of Bible quotes, all making the point that I am a spawn of satan and surely destined for damnation, along with a number of nasty attacks against those of the Muslim faith.

What sets these fundamentalist friends apart from the historic tradition of the church is how they read Scripture — they tend to read it from a very surface point of view, what some call a literal reading, but what is in fact not so much literal, as not being willing to dive beneath the surface of things.

Scripture is holy and ancient and profound not because it is easy and obvious, but because it is deep, mysterious: because it challenges who we are and how we think.

So it comes as no surprise that scripture is deeply ironic, constantly reminding us how different God's ways are from our ways.

Truth be told, God seems to get a kick out of reversing our expectations so that just when we think it's all figured out, lo and behold, something completely different happens!

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

You know Mary!

We first met her sitting quietly with Jesus, while Martha is setting the table, stirring the stew and milking the goat.

And when Martha, who is everyone's definition of the good host, complains to Jesus, Jesus says that Mary is the one who's at the right place, at the right time.

So much for our etiquette classes!

Today we have another Mary story, only now, unproductive Mary blows a whole year's pay on perfume!

Imagine your unemployed sister cracking open a \$50,000 bottle of 1928 bordeaux to share with her deathbed pal!

But this time it's not Martha going ballistic, it's Judas!

Judas, who is about to betray the very one who just last week fed 5000 people with a few loaves and fish — and he wants Mary's money to feed the poor.

Perhaps St. John, in writing his gospel, worried we'd take Judas' words of concern for the poor at face value, so he explains that Judas is a thief, a scoundrel.

Just in case we're missing the irony, St. John whispers, "take a deeper look."

And yet, the irony continues, because Jesus is here to save the lost; and who is more lost than Judas?

Can it be God's grace embraces even God's betrayer?

There's more with our friend Lazarus, who just days ago lay rotting in the grave, with the irony being that because Lazarus was raised to life, the Jewish big shots decide to put Jesus to death.

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

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 to have the whole nation 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 as the greatest sign that in God, there is only life; and yet, the high priest of God schemes to murder the greatest sign of God's love, which is Jesus.

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

Things like giving away in order to receive, refusing to return evil for evil, dying in order to live: these are not obvious truths....

Much like the koans of Buddhism: "what is the sound of one hand clapping?" – we are called to sit with the mystery, not to unravel it – to let the mystery unravel us.

It's why we don't interpret scripture, but that scripture, properly read, interprets us.

The paradoxes of Jesus are intended to shake us up, so that in the shaking, we might glimpse something of the majesty and awe of God.

When St John tells us about the glory of Jesus, he's not talking about Jesus sitting comfortably on a cushioned throne.

For John, Jesus enters his glory when we see him hanging there, in agony, on the tree.

For John, the judgment of God is not condemnation or rejection – the judgment of God is mercy and forgiveness, it is undeserved love.

Paradox is the life blood of our faith.

Paradox takes us deep; it refuses to let us accept comic book renderings of the purpose of our lives just because we want to know the answers.

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

St. Paul, today, begs us to resist the temptation to know all the answers because, when he knew all the answers, he was killing the people of God: with a clean conscience, with the conviction that he was doing the right thing....until God knocked him down and turned him around.

Paul comes to see that all his certainty wasn't worth a pile of -- skybala – (that's 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 Judas never sees this side of the grave, what Mary sees all along, what Franklin Graham's version of Christianity too often misses, is that God is the gracious giver; who rejects all violence; who will go to any length to have every human being as her own...

And so to follow Jesus means we too become gracious givers, even when the giving isn't returned; we too walk the extra mile, we too love our enemy, and we too recognize that it's not us, but the power of God, made strong in our weakness, that transforms our lives.

It means remembering that things aren't always what they seem.

It means questioning the easy answers, rejecting the airtight cases so many make when telling us who God is and what God expects.

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 is in the contrast between Judas and Mary.

Mary gives all she has to Jesus.

The expensive ointment, poured over his feet, wiped with her hair.

It is a beautiful, even sensual moment, so odd in a culture where a woman's hair remains braided and concealed, much less fully arrayed to wipe away the grime, the scent of precious oils....

She places all of her life at his service, making no demands, asking for nothing in return.

And there is Judas, rejecting the gift; insisting the money be better spent elsewhere.

That money should go to the poor, whether in Jerusalem or in Africa, is not an evil thing.

Wanting certainty about how God wishes us to navigate our lives is not a bad thing.

But they are examples of the good being the enemy of the best.

They are examples of how we so often try to control God rather than surrendering to Jesus.

But if you will take the risk and surrender to this strange yet intriguing savior, he will take you to places beyond your wildest imagination.

Press on my friends, because Christ has made you his own.

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