

Things Aren't Always As They Seem

Taking time with the scriptures allows us to look below the surface of things, past the trite and easy answers, and to enter a world that is as mysterious as it is strange.

When it comes to our faith, things aren't always as they seem.

Today, just scratching a little bit, what blossoms out first is a forest of irony everywhere we turn this morning.

There's Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

The Mary story we know best has her sitting down next to Jesus, quietly listening, while her sister Martha is bustling around getting things done.

Every time that story was read in church when I was a kid, I cringed, because I knew my mom was going to get in the priest's face about how unfair it was for Jesus to commend Mary's hanging out while telling Martha she needed to chill out, and relax.

As a mother of five, my mom, like many of you, knew a lot about bustling about, and knew how tough it is to just sit down and be at peace.

Today we have another story about Mary, only now, Mary, the unproductive one, at least as we define being unproductive, blows a whole year's pay on perfume!

Imagine your unemployed brother cracking open a \$50,000 bottle of wine and drinking it with his pal who's on his last legs...!

But the irony of unproductive Mary blowing a year's wages isn't the only irony staring back at us from the pages of today's lesson.

Take a look at Judas, who is about to betray the very one who feeds 5000 people with just a few loafs and a couple of fish, and he's complaining that Mary's money should have gone 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 about Judas being a thief, a scoundrel.

Just in case we're missing the irony, St. John whispers, "things aren't always what they seem."

Not to be outdone in today's irony department is our friend Lazarus, newly raised from the grave by Jesus.

Probably still a little smelly and perhaps still blinking at the strong rays of the sun, having been dead for days just a little while ago, you have to wonder what Lazarus is feeling, as he reclines next to Jesus at the table set by Martha, watching the food being prepared.

What's ironic is that because Lazarus is raised from the dead, the Pharisees decide to put Jesus to death.

By bringing Lazarus out of the tomb, Jesus guarantees his own entry into 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 the religious big shots hold a meeting, at which 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*...

Things aren't always as they seem when it comes to our faith.

Often, there is irony upon irony, and it's not finished yet.

In the verses immediately following what we read today,

"Word got out among the Jews that Jesus was back in town. The people came to take a look, not only at Jesus, but also at Lazarus, who had been raised from the dead. So the high priest plotted to *kill Lazarus* because so many of the Jews were going over and believing in Jesus on account of him." Jn. 12:9-11.

Lazarus is raised from the dead by Jesus as the last and greatest sign that in God, there is only and always life; and yet, the high priest of God is planning to murder this last and greatest sign of God's love.

I've been thinking a lot about the depth and meatiness of scripture in part because I went to a luncheon last week hosted by a group called the Christian Lawyers Association.

Yes, I know that sounds like an oxymoron: something like Jumbo Shrimp and Military Intelligence (sorry Keith!)

So, at this lunch, held at The Plaza Club no less (a very fancy private club downtown) the speaker was a Southern Baptist minister.

He came to talk about his near death experience of being in a car accident, how he died and went to heaven.

Heaven, by the way, from this fellow's account, looks an awful lot like the Sunday School comics most of us grew up with: twelve lovely pearly gates, gold paved streets, and then there's a big bright light shining off in the distance.

I must say, that while I don't doubt the sincerity of the speaker, I was amazed that the crowd gathered to listen was so taken in.

If the kingdom of God is just like we imagine it to be, then we are in trouble, because our imaginations are always too small when it comes to God.

If what awaits us in the next life is just this life, only shinier, with better teeth and plenty of hair, then I fear that we sell God and the miracle of our existence, far too short.

And that is why, I think, Jesus teaches us not only to be on the look out for the ironic, but when he really gets going, his teaching is all about paradox.

Letting go in order to receive, releasing in order to hold on, dying in order to live: none of these paradoxes leads to sure fire answers or comforting "that's the way it is" certainty.

The paradoxes of Jesus are something like the koans of Buddhism: "what is the sound of one hand clapping?" - we are called to sit with the mystery, not to try to unravel it - but rather to let the mystery unravel us.

Things are not always as they seem.

The paradoxes of Jesus are intended to shake us to the very core of our being, so that in the shaking, we might glimpse, if only for a moment, if only for an instant, something of the majesty and awe of God: a majesty and awe that is most profoundly expressed as the Son of God hangs in agony on a tree.

Paradox takes us deep; it refuses to let us accept comic book renderings of the purpose of our lives or of the mystery of creation 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 now, at least not on our terms.*

Paul, today, practically begs us to resist the temptation to know all the answers because, as he so nakedly tells us, when he knew all the answers, he ended up hunting down and killing the people of God: all with the cleanest conscience, all with the certainty that he was doing the right thing....until God knocked him down and turned him around.

Paul came to see that all his certainty wasn't worth a pile of ... well, he uses the S word.

Paul says all that certainty isn'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, is that God comes to us as the gracious self-giver; that God rejects violence in all of its forms; that God will go to any length to have each and every one of us as his own; even as God displays God's majesty and awe hanging in agony from a tree...

And so to follow God means that we too become gracious self-givers, even when the giving isn't returned; to walk the extra mile, to love our enemy, and in all of these things, to recognize that when we do so, it isn't us on our own, but the power of God, made strong in our weakness, transforming our lives from the inside out, and from the outside in.

It means living life recognizing that things aren't always what they seem.

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

And it means identifying and then letting go of old angers, or lives lived with resentment.

"Garrison Keilor tells the story of Pastor Enquist of Lake Woebegone Lutheran Church who is heading out on a wonderful trip with his wife from the frozen tundra of Minnesota in January to the tropical setting of Orlando, Florida.

They are going for a clergy conference, but it is the trip of a lifetime.

Pastor Enquist has worked very hard for many years for the people of Lake Woebegone Lutheran Church, and he's never had a trip like this to spend with his wife.

Packed and ready to go the next morning, he attends the monthly vestry meeting, where long-time vestry member Val Tollefsen speaks up.

Mr. Tollefsen notes that it is really a shame, the pictures they have been seeing of all those poor children suffering in the drought in Africa.

He wonders if there isn't *something* they could do for them.

Maybe they can find some extra money to send them, some deadweight somewhere in the budget, maybe *travel* or something like that.

There is silence.

After a long pause, Pastor Enquist says, "Well, the Mrs. and I could always give up our trip to Orlando."

Again, there's a long pause, with Pastor Enquist hoping and praying that someone will jump in immediately and say, "Oh no, Pastor Enquist, you and your wife need that trip! You have worked so hard for us through all these years. You've been there for us whenever we've needed you. No, you take this trip."

But, instead, after a long pause, Val Tollefsen simply says, "O.K., Pastor, if that's the way ya feel about it."

And that, says Garrison Keillor, is how Pastor Enquist lost his trip to Florida for he and "the Mrs."

On the surface, Val Tollefsen appears to be right.

That money would better be spent giving it to the poor, right?

But beneath the surface, we know that Val Tollefsen has always been a nemesis of Pastor Enquist.

He's probably been a nemesis for every pastor.

He's the kind of person that lives with resentment and so makes life difficult for others.

No, Val Tollefsen didn't really speak up out of feelings of great charity.

Things are not always what they seem." Paul J. Nuechterlein. (paraphrased).

Jesus invites us to go deep, even when that means we won't have all the answers, even when the way forward sometimes seems murky and unclear.

In some ways, it is in the contrast between Judas and Mary.

Mary simply makes a complete gift of all she has to Jesus.

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

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

And there is Judas, objecting to the gift; insisting the money spent would have better uses.

Judas, a great theologian notes, "reserves for himself the right to decide for himself ... what ... discipleship really involves."

For Judas, [discipleship] is not an end in itself, but a means to some other end, which is perhaps not yet clear to him ... [but which continually causes] interruptions in his relationship to Jesus." Barth, CD II 2 463.

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

Wanting to know all we can about the next life is not an evil 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 to simply surrender all that we have and all that we are to Jesus.

In that surrender, heaven will take care of itself, and the mysteries of our faith will take us, in this life and the next, to depths beyond our wildest dreams.

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