

The Great Reversal

A minister friend of mine told me that her efforts to counsel a fellow came to a speedy end, because, the fellow said, you didn't cite a Bible verse in the advice you gave me.

This man had apparently become involved in one of the more fundamentalist groups in the area, hence his demand that the minister use the Bible as a sort of "You Got A Question - We Got The Answers - Guide to Living."

What sets these fundamentalist friends apart from the historic tradition of the church is how they read Scripture — often using a bumper sticker slogan to understand these sacred writings: "God said it, I believe it, case closed."

But things are not so simple.

We are several cultures, languages and ages separated from the words that are written, so that their meaning, in their particular context, is often not so obvious.

But beyond those difficulties, Scripture is holy and ancient and profound not because it is an easy answer book for daily living, but because it meets us in the complexity and messiness of our everyday ordinary lives: and in that meeting, challenges who we are and how we think.

So it comes as no surprise that scripture is very often 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 unexpected happens!

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

You know Mary!

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

And when Martha, who is the very definition of the good host, complains to Jesus, Jesus upends expectations, saying that Mary is the one who's got it right.

So much for etiquette class!

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 \$20,000 bottle of wine to share with her pal - even if 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 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' words of concern for the poor at face value, he explains that Judas is a thief, a scoundrel.

Just in case we're missing the irony, 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?

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

Then there's our friend Lazarus, who just days ago lay rotting in the grave, with the irony being that because Lazarus is raised to life, the Jewish 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 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 — a sign demonstrating that, in God, there is only life — and yet, Caiaphas, the high priest of God is up to his neck plotting the execution of the ultimate sign of God's love, Jesus.

These twists and turns make the Hana Highway look like a straight road!

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 – but perhaps to let the mystery unravel us.

It's why we don't so much interpret scripture, but that scripture, properly lived with, 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.

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

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

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

The unexpected continues in the tomb after our Lord is killed.

You expect that after the resurrection, Jesus is done with his work, returning to the Father is all that remains.

But as our Apostles Creed says, when he is raised, he doesn't go up, he goes down, into hell.

"The unthinkable happens.

God's love reaches to the deepest depths, to the most unlovely, to the most undeserving, reminding us that God is present in all creation, and while we may lose touch with God, God never fails to stand in solidarity with all of us." J. Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels, Year C*, p. 105, paraphrased.

Paradox is the life blood of our faith.

Paradox takes us deep; it refuses easy answers, because the answers that matter are never easy.

Paradox tells 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 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.

In Paul's case, the great debate was whether rules about circumcision could keep people out of the church.

Today the great debate is whether the rules concerning people of certain sexual orientations can keep people out of the church, or whether ones gender can 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 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 the fundamentalist version of Christianity too often misses, is that God is the gracious giver; who rejects all violence; who will go to any length, to any depth, to have every human being come home...

And so to follow Jesus means to become gracious givers, even when the giving isn't returned; to walk the extra mile, to love our enemy, and to 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; reducing the fragrance of pure love to cold hard cash.

Money for the poor is not a bad thing.

Wanting black and white answers about how God wishes us to navigate our lives is not a bad thing.

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

They are examples of how we so often try to control God rather than letting it go, letting it be.

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 joy and wonder — beyond our widest imaginations.

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