

SERMON, SEPTEMBER 23 AND 24, 2017

Matthew 20: 1-16

“CLEANSING THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION”

A few weeks ago, my wife Jill and I took a trip to Cleveland for my niece’s wedding, a thoroughly modern-day affair. My niece is a non-practicing Catholic, marrying a Jewish man, the wedding being officiated by my brother, an Episcopal priest, in the Cleveland Botanical Gardens, a beautiful if secular place. My brother, Dave, was asked by the bride and groom to perform the ceremony with minimal religious language – which was probably wise given all the religious traditions that were represented. So Dave consulted with a justice of the peace in his congregation on how to perform an essentially “secular” religious ceremony. Yes, times have changed.

Yet, for me, even though all the customary religious language wasn’t present, it was a spiritual ceremony, even holy I would say. I sensed the Holy Spirit was there, transcending the irony, perhaps even reveling in the abundance of it. I think sometimes language can get in the way of understanding. That’s why the mystics spent so much time in silence.

As we know, Jesus often spoke in parables. Psalm 78 says, “I will open my mouth in parables, drawing lessons from of old.” Chapter 13 of the gospel of Matthew

cites this Psalm as the reason Jesus taught in parables. Parables use language that we have to chew on in order to understand. We can't get hung up on the literal language. Fr. Rohr explains that parables are similar in some ways to Zen koans. They are meant to undo the rational mind.

Returning again to our trip to Cleveland, Jill and I visited the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum while we were there. For people our age, it is outstanding. And for folks a little older than I, there's a whole room dedicated to the King, Elvis Presley. Early black gospel singers are represented as well. But what caught my eye was an exhibit on that great band called the Doors. Admittedly, the leader of the Doors, Jim Morrison, had serious drug addiction issues. But I learned from the exhibit that one of his favorite poets was William Blake, who happens to be one of my favorite poets as well. William Blake wrote, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to us as it is: infinite." (Repeat). It is from this line that Jim Morrison named his band the Doors. So, as a teen when I was jumping up and down on my bed playing air guitar and singing along to "Riders on the Storm" or "Come on Baby Light My Fire," – and my mother would burst into the room in exasperation hollering to turn that NOISE down -- she didn't know I was actually listening to a poet. (Of course, I didn't either!). Cleansing the doors of perception. I think another way of saying that is "seeing with the eyes of the heart." That's what is necessary to understand a parable.

The Kingdom of heaven is like... The gospel of Matthew is full of parables in which Jesus is trying to describe the Kingdom of heaven or the Kingdom of God.

Just a few examples: The kingdom of heaven is like:

A farmer who sows good seed in a field that is compromised by weeds.

A treasure buried in a field that a person finds and who hides it again only to sell all he has to buy that field.

A net thrown into the sea by fishermen who haul all kinds of fish to shore, some marketable, some not.

And one of my favorites: A king who throws a wedding feast for his son but none of the hoity-toity guests on the invitation list want to come; so he invites people in off the street who are more than happy to come. But one of the street people is not dressed appropriately, so he gets thrown back out onto the street.

Jesus even asks his disciples at one point, "Do you understand all these things?" Even though they replied "yes," I wonder. Their doors of perception were not always the cleanest.

And now we have another one of these "The kingdom of heaven is like" stories. The kingdom of heaven is like a vineyard. (Describe the story).

It doesn't seem fair does it. The person who worked for one hour gets the same pay as the person who worked all day. But is the point of the story about economic parity?

Let's do something a little different. Let's personalize the story and add a little detail. I'm going to name the person who worked all day in the vineyard "Bryan." And I'm going to name the person who worked for one hour "Jane." (We'll bring the story into the modern day since we have a mixed gender workforce today.)

Bryan has judged this situation as entirely unfair that Jane should get paid what he was paid, even though he received exactly what he bargained for. Why does he think this situation is unfair? It's because he's made certain assumptions about Jane. Here's what is going through Bryan's mind. Jane is lazy. She had breakfast in bed reading the newspaper and spent the rest of the morning at her tennis club. Then she lunched with friends at one of the town's high-end restaurants and had a massage and a mani-pedi that afternoon. After a late afternoon cocktail, she decided to wander down to the town square to see what was going on. When asked by the landowner if she wanted to pick grapes, she thought, "Why not! It's only for an hour, and perhaps he'll offer me a glass of wine afterward!" This is who Bryan thinks Jane is, even though he has no basis in fact for his beliefs.

But Bryan is dead wrong about Jane. Jane is actually a single mom who struggles to survive on the sporadic child support payments the child's father sends. She has spent all day long at home with her sick child who was running a temperature of 104 degrees. She has been praying nonstop. She wants to take him to the doctor, but she can't afford it. She doesn't have health insurance because her Medicaid application is hung up in the state bureaucracy somewhere. She's estranged from her family because she got pregnant as a teen, so they won't support her. And her friends are not much help either because all of them are in the same precarious boat. At about 5:00, her child's fever breaks. She feels she can run down to the square to see if possible there might be some work, any work, she could do to make a little money. When she is hired by the landowner for an hour and gets paid a day's wages, she is overcome with gratitude at God's immense blessing.

Bryan didn't know any of this. Is it still unfair that Jane got paid the same amount as Bryan? Perhaps, but now it's a harder call, isn't it.

Perhaps the story is intended to hit Bryan right between the eyes because he shouldn't be judging somebody else, particularly somebody he does not know anything about.

I know I've taken liberty with the facts. But then the story is pretty barren of facts, particularly about the personal lives of these workers who the landowner found at

the town square. I've simply chosen to fill in some details to allow the story to speak to me. Parables allow, even encourage, such freedom.

Maybe the story is about something else. Bryan is angry at the unfairness of the situation. We do know that because the text says he "grumbled." But Bryan wouldn't be so angry if he hadn't misjudged Jane.

Bryan, in his exasperation, digs the hole a little deeper for himself. He denigrates Jane by saying to her, "You know, the only reason you got that cushy job in the first place is because you're a black woman." Now, I know those facts aren't in the text either. But perhaps the text is prompting Bryan to deal with his racial and gender biases along with his predilection to judge.

Or perhaps the story is about envy. Bryan is envious of Jane. He thinks, "What star does she live under that she can turn an hour's labor into a day's wages?" The landowner even says, "Are you envious because I am generous?"

Or perhaps the story is about pride. Bryan's pride has been hurt because he's thinking that the landowner is valuing Jane's one-hour of labor as equivalent to his 12 hours of labor. Poor Bryan. Don't you feel sorry for him?

Or maybe the story is about greed. Bryan just wants more because he's trying to keep up with the Janes's and he can't do it if Jane is going to get paid for one hour

what he got paid for 12. Perhaps the story is trying to teach Bryan to be satisfied with what he has, which is enough.

Bryan has exhibited a majority of the seven deadly sins in this story: envy, anger, greed and pride. Is the parable asking Bryan to examine himself about these things? I think so.

Or perhaps this story is about _____. You fill in the blank based on your own life. If we really ponder the story, I'm sure it hits all of us at some level.

The Buddhists say that suffering is our common ground. The vineyard Jesus creates in this parable is the ground of our suffering. Each of us moves into the vineyard of our own lives where, if we want to become transformed human beings, we have to come to terms with our human failings, weep over them, and ask for forgiveness. Laboring in the vineyard is how we become transformed into the likeness of Christ. It's not easy work. We try, sometimes we succeed. But invariably we also, at times, fail. In the words of St. Benedict, "Always we begin again." Some of us have to labor in the vineyard for a long time. But the point of laboring is not to become perfect. It is to become compassionate. One day Bryan will understand that he and Jane's lives are interconnected in some mysterious cosmic way. As Bryan's doors of perception are cleansed, one day he will have

compassion for Jane. Who knows, maybe some day he'll even donate part of his day's wages to a charity for unwed teen mothers.

“As the doors of our perception are cleansed, we begin to perceive everything as it truly is: infinite.” We begin to comprehend how our lives are infinitely and inextricable interconnected with other people's lives, and we begin to live our lives by the Golden Rule even when life seems unfair. “The kingdom of heaven is like....”