

“The Sower and Jesus’ Stories”

Homily of July 10, 2005

by Father Brian Joyce

Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years ago, in what historians call “The Middle Ages,” most of the monks in a monastery, like most of the people in the world, did not know how to read or write. But they still get up every morning and begin by going to chapel and sitting in silence in front of a large copy of the Bible. Then, the one monk in the community who could read would get up and read to them a short passage from the Bible. Then he would step back, bow, sit down in silence. After a little bit, he would get up and would read the exact same passage again. Then he would sit down. Then he would get up and read the exact same passage again. They would do this again and again and again until each monk had left, and the chapel empty. The idea was for each to listen until he gathered something to take with him for the rest of the day, to leave more ready for daily life than when he came in. I am willing to bet (We have no way of knowing, but I am willing to bet...) that the favorite and best-remembered stories by the monks, or passages or sections of the Bible, were the story sections where Jesus told stories. That’s why, at the beginning of Mass, I asked people to remember their favorite stories or any story by Jesus that they could remember, and share it with each other. Some of you did pretty well. Some were saying, “Huh?” or “I can’t think of one.”

I made a list of my “Hit Parade,” my top four stories by Jesus. The best-loved, the most remembered, the most popular stories that Jesus told. See what you think. One would have to be “The Prodigal Son” with the father. Another would have to be “The Good Samaritan” with the Jewish victim of crime on the road to Jericho. Another one would have to be “The Good Shepherd” who went after the one lost sheep and left the ninety-nine. Remind me to tell you before I stop today about my favorite all time shepherd story that happened to me in Israel. The fourth for me would be the story in today’s gospel about the Sower who goes out to sow the seeds. Each of those stories offers the chance to take something out of them that we could carry with us for the rest of the day. Each of those stories has something in it that helps us be a little more ready for life.

And there are two things that all of those stories do. Every one of them tells us something about God and tells us something about ourselves. Something about God and something about ourselves.... What about God? When I look at those four stories, I look at all four of them and ask, “What do they tell me about God?” a phrase that comes to my mind is “outrageous extravagance.” The story of the Prodigal Son, really the Good Samaritan, the figure is the father. The father had been betrayed. He has been hurt and he has been deserted. What does he do? He scans the horizon, looking for the return and hoping for the return of his son, who had hurt him. He is the first one to go out and meet and welcome his son. When his son comes back, it is not enough to return to business as usual. Only the best clothes will do. Only the best food will do. Only an extravagant party will do. Outrageous extravagance! And that’s what our God is like.

The next story about the Good Samaritan.... Well, the Good Samaritan is walking on the Jericho Road and he comes across this man on the side of the road. He doesn’t just give him his loose change. He doesn’t just call 911. He does notice the man is Jewish, which means that he is a foreigner, that, for him, he is a real sinner and, for him, he is a traditional enemy. And what does he do? He stops his entire trip, halts it for the entire day. He binds up the man’s wounds. He takes him to a hotel and pays for his room and board and he offers to come back the next day and do more if it is needed. Outrageous extravagance! And that’s what God is like.

The third story is of the Good Shepherd who risks losing ninety-nine of his sheep just to get out there and find that one. And when he finds that lamb, he carries it back home and he gathers all his neighbors and asks them to have a block party to celebrate his bringing back the lamb. Outrageous extravagance!And that’s our God.

Here’s the story. 1995, a group of us, fifty of us, went from Christ the King to the Holy Land, and we landed in Tel Aviv at night. We took a bus to Galilee to the Tiberius Hotel on the shore of Tiberius. The next morning we got up and took a bus to the Mount of the Beatitudes and we celebrated Mass on the Mount of the Beatitudes. We could look all around. I noticed as we were getting into the bus, a huge flock of sheep. I said, “Oh, I’m going to see my first shepherd. Jesus kept saying, ‘God is like a good shepherd... God is like a shepherd of a flock’ right there in Palestine.” We got on the bus and we turned the corner and there were the sheep and there was the shepherd.... There SHE was. I think Jesus had left something out in the story.

And finally there is the sower, which sounds like a near-sighted farmer with a bad aim. But really he is scattering this seed all over the place. And it tells us, “God is generous in the planting and determined in the harvest.” Rough ground, rocky ground, thorny ground, dry ground, whatever.... It doesn’t matter. It does matter. The rough edges of our unfinished personalities and lives are no obstacle to the generosity of God. There is no stopping his harvest. Thirty times, sixty times, a hundred times his investment, our God is generous and extravagant. That’s what our God is like.

Those stories tell us something about God. They tell us something about ourselves too. It’s pretty obvious. The Story of the Prodigal Son says we should be a people of forgiveness. That means even if we are hurt or if we have to be a people of forgiveness. Even if it means we have to make the first step, we are called to be a people of forgiveness. It does not mean that we endorse hurt or harm or condone it, or necessarily even that we have a party with people who have offended us. But we, at the very least, have to let go of anger, let go of revenge and move on with our lives.

The story of the Good Samaritan and the Good Shepherd is not just about service and caring. It’s more so than that. We should be a people who care especially for those who are different from us, those who have no claim on us, because of their race, because they are family, because they belong to our nation, because they are like us. Simply because their need is there we should be reaching out to them like the Good Shepherd and the Good Samaritan. And I really think either Jesus told more stories that didn’t get written down or he would if he had the time. I think the second act of those two stories is Jesus would say we have to do more about that the Good Samaritan probably the next day got up and said, “Hey, we really have to do something about the crime rate on the Jericho Road. Too many good people are being hurt.” Or the Good Shepherd said, “It’s time I fixed the hole in that fence. Too many sheep are being lost.” The Bible and Catholic Social Teaching teach us we not only have to be a people of service but a people concerned about the system and changing the system so that hurt and evil does not go on.

And finally, the story of the Sower, at the end, says, “You are the seed.” Each one of us is called to bear the harvest. If we listen and believe the word of God, we have to be a people who make a difference. In the people we live, where we live, we make a difference for the better. The stories Jesus tells are meant to invade our hearts and the stories Jesus tells invite us, not to get up and walk out, like the monks (at least before the collection) but they invite us to carry something with us for the rest of the day and to leave us a little more ready for the rest of our lives. Amen.