

## Paradoxes

I have a confession to make: I have a new love interest. In the short time I've known her, she's helped me to better experience the world with deeper spiritual insight. Before I tell you more about this wonderful woman, I probably should explain how my new love interest is connected to today's readings. (Oh, and by the way, Lori knows about my new friend and approves.)

So first, some thoughts on the readings for today. Matthew has been setting up some awfully high and sometimes puzzling standards for us recently. Remember the lessons from these past weeks: forgive those who have hurt you 70 times 7. However, he also says this: try to bring a wayward congregant back into the fold, but if they can't be convinced by the whole church, treat them as if they were a Gentile...or a tax collector, even.

Jesus was a wise teacher who in the two cases today creates a paralysis of choice among the chief priests and elders. In the first instance they seem to get it: they're condemned if they take the first option to say that John's baptism was ordained by heaven, but they can't give humans the credit either because either way their authority

is undermined. Jesus has taken the wind out of their sails by posing a dilemma that makes them losers whichever option they choose.

The second dilemma he presents is strictly logical. Both sons acted unethically, one by agreeing to work and then not showing up, the second by refusing to work but then showing up. Which halfway behavior is the most moral? Or the least immoral? Again, whichever horn of the dilemma the clerics choose undercuts their authority. As does choosing neither: to not decide is to decide.

Why is Jesus engaged in tying his clerical critics in knots? Clearly he wants to undermine their authority to judge him. Rendering your opposition sputtering in indecision will do that. But, of course, he knows that it will also aggravate them royally and drive them to be even more suspicious of him.

But besides politics, is there anything here for Jesus' followers? For us? Here's one possible response: I think you can read these logical teasings as if they are **koans**. A koan, as maybe you know, is a saying that doesn't compute, that doesn't make sense; and the goal is to get the listener (usually a novice) to change how they think and perceive and believe. One of the most famous Zen koans asks what is

the sound of one hand clapping. The Sufi tradition has its version of koans as well. Here's a famous one from the poet Rumi: "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I'll meet you there."

Hopefully a koan will catapult the listener into a different frame of mind...or "no mind" at all. They're after the transformation called *kenosis* in Greek: To empty out; to leave the ego and its all-consuming concerns behind and be open to a new way of being. In the first reading for today, I think Ezekial speaks to this transformation when he says "get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit." And our second reading from Philippians makes it clear that to follow Jesus we need to empty ourselves.

Our ordinary approach to understanding our world is often called dualism by philosophers: using dual categories to see and judge the world. Right/wrong, good/bad, young/old, dark/light...and so on. Jesus wants his followers to approach the world with our hearts rather than our heads, with love rather than with logic. Or perhaps, with the logic of love.

Which brings me back to my new friend. I met Dorothy in front of Ecumenical Towers while I was waiting to give a ride to a Trail

customer. (Trail of Johnson County is a non-profit service where volunteers like me offer services such as rides to appointments, yard work or house cleaning to older people so that they can remain in their homes.) She was sitting among the flowers drawing and painting on a hot afternoon, and soon we were involved in a heart-warming conversation. Even though she is 88, Dorothy is a professional piano teacher as well as an amateur painter, giving piano lessons to 15 people every week at the Senior Center. She was a concert pianist and piano teacher in New York for many years before she came to Iowa City 30 years ago.

Happily my Trail client was late so I had a good 20 minutes to be transfixed by this Italian-American woman from the Bronx. Her loving charm was genuine and given freely to everyone who passed by. If you met Dorothy you would know what I mean. To give an example of her charisma, the following week I arranged a double date over coffee with her and our dear friend Virginia, who is also a long-time piano instructor; and I wasn't surprised that they hit it off immediately. They talked piano and teaching for nearly an hour, which I found fascinating (and as a musical idiot, nearly incomprehensible.)

I'm not sure why I started volunteering with the Trail program. But the frequent encounters I've had with its clients, many of whom have become friends, have helped me be more comfortable relating to a wide variety of people. Even more significant is that these connections have helped me be a better listener, to have keener empathy, to be less judgmental.

For example, I recently took a man to a dental appointment across town in Coralville. Along the way I learned a short version of his life story, his travels, jobs, children, grandchildren. And I learned some things about the added struggles he has faced as a black man. I felt surprised and privileged to be shown a glimpse into the deep and private wounds in his life. I don't think this would have happened if Dorothy hadn't helped me to learn to listen better with my heart.

Here's another example. I recently helped a woman by retrieving her mail and hauling her garbage. She's wheel-chair bound in a modest mobile home and even the simplest chores are difficult for her. I listened to her story for a time and then with a tear in her eye, she brought one to my eye by giving me a little bag of candy in gratitude. I still tear up remembering this simple, but precious, gift.

I rarely work with a Trail client who isn't anxious to tell their story and who isn't lonely. Much of the time I'm with them I help them most by listening. And the more I do that, the more I benefit. I'm beginning to learn that behind the many lessons of our religion such as "it's better to give than to receive," or "do not lie or steal," lies the way of the heart that Ezekial and Jesus are teaching us today.

Franciscan priest and teacher Richard Rohr says this about the benefits of generosity of heart: "Jesus invites...all doubters into a *tangible* religion, one that makes touching human pain and suffering the way into both compassion and understanding. For most of us, the mere touching of another's wound probably feels like an act of outward kindness; we don't realize that its full intended effect is to change us as much as it might change them.... Human sympathy is the best and easiest way to open heart space and to make us live inside our own bodies. God never intended most human beings to become philosophers or theologians [thank goodness!], but God does want all humans to represent God's own sympathy and empathy. And it's okay if it takes a while to get there."

I am grateful for Rohr's final dispensation. When it comes to matters of the heart clearly I've been a slow learner.

My wish for you all is that you, too, will find a "Dorothy."