

Liturgical Readings for July 2018 – Cycle A

Introduction: “We didn’t know what to do.”

I begin with a quote from parishioner William Shea, spoken to me before the 9:30 Mass at St. Leo’s on June 17th, 2018. The prior evening my wife and I had been dining at a local restaurant. Bill and his wife arrived a little later and were seated in the booth behind Jane. We said hello and all that but kept to our seating. As Jane and I came to the close of our dinner the thought came to me to pay for their dinner without their knowing it. We have a long relationship and I was also thinking of their loss of their only son in combat in Iraq some thirteen years ago. As with restaurants nowadays their bill came to no small change due to what looked like a couple of Martinis.

So come the following morning, Bill expressed in so many words his thanks - reflecting his reaction when the waitress made known our gesture. He said to me: “We didn’t know what to do!” And it hit me: he just summed up the impact of the whole New Testament in six words.

How? Because what he had experienced was an instance of grace – the purely gratuitous way Christ and Paul tell us God relates to us. “Your bill is paid, you’re free of any quid pro quo notion of God or your destiny. You’re covered by the gracious Source of the universe.”

But it’s Bill’s reaction that fascinates and informs: “We didn’t know what to do!” We are so trained or conditioned by the ideologies, even creeds, under which we live to pay our dues, what’s due, be it the cost of a dinner or the consequences of a perpetual sense of guilt, of some kind of radical debt, that when an odd, seemingly oblivious love decides to charge us nothing, when sin, mistakes, are understood and the sinner embraced like one’s own son or daughter – intimacy guaranteed no matter what, we don’t know how to react, our reflexes are denied a purpose. We need an explanation that stabilizes our logic. The experience of grace leaves us looking into a void that while gracious, wide open, absolutely new territory, also leaves us a bit shaken.

“So what do we do now? It seems in some small way we have no immediate future. Do we leave the restaurant? Isn’t there something missing in the routine we anticipated when we entered the place? Can’t we wash the dishes or something? Doesn’t this leave me vulnerable, no longer in charge? Lost in the moment? Can I live in such a void, can I learn to live in an environment where I don’t pay? And if I’m on the threshold of such a world

where paying my way is not to remain my constant preoccupation but rather finding ways to be inspirationally graceful, generous, imaginative myself, how do I do that? I'm not used to it. A new way of Being?"

Applying the brake

May this not be why, regardless of the Gospel's revelation of God as a God of grace, ready in Christ to die for us, to liberate us from the routines imposed on us over time by generations more worried than creative – may this not be why Christendom fell back upon a quid pro quo image of God, of warnings and rules, frowns and smiles, bad books and safe books and so on, confessional shutters flying back and forth . . . instead of daring to go the extra mile, loving one's enemies, caring to the hyperbolic degree illustrated in the Sermon on the Mount? The Gospel was adjusted to the way we *are* – needing to be prodded, not overestimating human nature, suppressing inspiration, demanding yet not demanding too much, supplying crutches despite the stories in which Jesus tells a paralytic to trust he can rise and walk. The way of Empires, Law, fish on Fridays, terms like venial and mortal become the way of the People of God and, if we walk at all, we end up walking in place for centuries.

Why? Because the Gospel miracles, the Letters of Paul and John, instead of inspiring us to step into adventure, to BE like God, were only heard but not listened to, not experienced personally, leaving us at best hesitant. After so long on a tricycle I'm offered a bicycle? How will I keep my balance?

Utopia

Does "not knowing what to do" confront us with a kind of Utopia, no place at all? Habit is put on hold. The stimuli needed to conduct business as usual vanish. We are left in mid ritual staring at a blank page. Paul Ricoeur has said a state of mind is utopian when it . . . tends to shatter the order of things.

I have always been fascinated by that phrase Jesus uses in his conversation with the Samaritan woman in John's Gospel. She says, *Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain* (Samaria, the sanctuary of hybrid Israelites) *but you people* (Jews) *say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem.* She refers to the opposed (yet really similar) ways of habit by which Samaritans and Jews traditionally conduct themselves.

And Jesus responds: *Believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem . . . But the hour is*

coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him. Neither here nor in Jerusalem – which opens up or unconceals a space beyond the options, beyond what societies accept as the norm. Where is that? Where does that leave us, chins dropped, eyes searching? By the way, the Greek word for truth in this passage is *aletheia* – which means that which is no longer hidden, concealed.

In his parables Jesus offers us a way of dealing with this sudden Utopia. A man is either planning to farm or testing the soil of some land he wants to buy – out to engage in a quid pro quo transaction – real estate - living within the logic of some kind of equivalence, and discovers a treasure beneath his feet. The sudden radical change in his immediate future shocks him. No time for delay, for quibbling over the price. He sells all that he owns, all that he was, and buys the field. An ordinary business deal that suddenly opens up upon untold possibilities and snaps the fellow out of mere commerce; he goes for broke, becomes extravagant (which means to wander beyond the limit). In other words his imagination takes over, leaving prudence behind.

Or a merchant (not from the Shane Company) is fingering his way through pearls – his usual job – and his trained eye sees one not yet seen by others – one of enormous worth. Reason fails him. His imagination, his willingness to go the extra mile takes over. He rids himself of all his current wealth (acquired through the logic of equivalence) and holds that precious triple A pearl before his elated eyes. He sees possibilities as if the pearl had become a crystal ball.

A sower goes out to sow. He knows much of the seed will end up on by paths, on rocky ground, among thorns but he nevertheless – in his extravagant tossing of seed here and there on an empty field - anticipates fruit, a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold. His imagination convinces him that what now lies concealed will appear, that this field, this world will flourish.

The Logic of Equivalence/The Logic of Superabundance

As the late scholar of language and interpretation (hermeneutics) Paul Ricoeur put it, we live within a logic of equivalence. Balanced budgets. Arms races to an ever-receding limit equal to that of a possible enemy. Hitler and Mussolini on their barber chairs in Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* – keeping their chairs level every time there is a change. Excess in a chase after equality. You have heard it said, *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a*

tooth; love your neighbor and hate your enemy. Trade wars: you cheat me, I'll cheat you. Tennis, anyone?

On the other hand the Gospel would transfer us into a logic of superabundance. *I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees [the book keepers] you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. When someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him as well. Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you. For if you love those who love you, what's superabundant about that? Life is more than collecting what you are owed and paying what you owe. If you greet your brothers only, what's unusual about that? The pagans do the same.*

Paul Ricoeur appeals with excitement to Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, chapter five, over the extremity of God's own logic of superabundance, God's imagination – which he began to exercise in Genesis chapter 1 when confronted by an earth *without form or shape with darkness over the abyss and a mighty wind sweeping over the waters*, by a Utopia, a no place, that left Bill Shea not knowing what to do – God knew what to do; he said: *Let there be light, and there was light . . .* and within seven days a cosmic work of art.

Ricoeur goes almost ecstatic when he turns to St. Paul's discourse on this divine logic of superabundance – the same as spelled out in the parables of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount and in the very life style of Christ. Paul, in order to stress this new logic repeats the same rhetorical phrase "*how much more*" four times. The logic of equivalence in our usual world can be summarized in terms of sin equals death, the punishment must fit the crime, every fault must get its equivalent due. (Of course by the same standard every good deed should get its reward but St. Paul – upon looking around – is quite skeptical about good deeds.)

But harking back to the biblical story of Adam Paul says:

*God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. **How much more** then, since we are now justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath (the logic of equivalence). Indeed if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, **how much more**, once reconciled, will we be saved by his life. . . . For if by that one person's transgression the many died, **how much more** did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one person Jesus Christ overflow*

*for the many. . . . For if, by the transgression of one person, death came to reign through that one, **how much more** will those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of justification come to reign in life through the one person Jesus Christ.*

In other words, if the system of reciprocity, equivalence, matching love with love but also hate with hate - strike me and I'll strike you - be nice to me and I'll be nice to you = shoot me and I'll shoot you - can cause so much havoc, indeed the transformation of the human imagination into a production of horror films and nuclear weapons and border walls, **how much more** will the logic of superabundance, of mutual grace, of my willingness to emulate God and lay down my life for a grieving civilization, to recover my imagination, bring about my metamorphosis into a poet, a human being, a saint . . . a citizen of that Utopia that lies concealed beyond Jerusalem and Samaria – which could also be our church if we listened to the Gospel?

It is not necessarily something you work at

Confronted by an alternative to the logic of equivalence and its discontents, Christians too often figure they've got to get to work, to initiate deeds of superabundance like start a new novena, make another retreat, or take up a collection . . . when often our habitual existence of quid pro quo is best transfigured by surprise. (Like the one we gave Bill and Mary.) At my age I'm having surprise insights all the time – not always world shaking but impactful and redundant! In the words of the lyric: *Who's that knocking at my door?*

Just the other day Jane was cleaning the birdcage in the TV room. We often leave the cage open so the two parakeets can exercise around the room. On carrying a clean tray from our laundry room to the TV room, we had left the TV room door open. The birds became excited and flew out into the laundry room, kitchen and finally the living room. And I let out expletives that are expressive of the logic of equivalence – such as damn and ultra-damn. I blew a gasket. And no effort throughout that day could get the birds back into their cage – which we had rolled into the living room to entice them.

The female eventually did enter and stayed there – but the male evaded my broom and whatever effort I made to channel it toward the open top of the cage. All night he hid out somewhere. Still aggravated over this intrusion upon my time and emotions, I awoke the next morning and finding him, I

tried again to encourage him toward the cage. The best I could do was get him to perch on the top, near but not through the cage opening. What to do?

And then the inspiration came. Since he's perched near the opening atop the cage, why not just move the cage *gently* out of the living room with him aboard through the kitchen and laundry room and through a vestibule back into the TV room? It worked. He even seemed to enjoy the ride. And once he was in the TV room I didn't care when he would reenter the cage. He eventually would. A sudden intrusion of imagination resolved the little crisis without my forcing the issue!

Imagination is funny
It makes a cloudy day sunny
It makes a bee think of honey
Just as I think of you

Imagination is crazy
Your whole perspective gets hazy
Starts you asking a daisy
What to do, what to do

July 1, 2018 – 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A

Gospel Reading: Mark 5: 21 – 43

The whole Gospel today contains two miracle stories, the raising of Jairus' daughter from death and the cure of an older woman suffering from continual hemorrhaging.

Part One: The raising of Jairus' daughter

If you read this simply as a miracle story of 2000 years ago and conclude *By golly, Jesus worked miracles! Therefore I believe in him!* and fail to relate it to a resurrection of your own even while you are reading it, you have missed the sacramental impact of the reading. The story confronts *you* with a threshold to cross from where dead is dead, where only facts are facts, where a cycle of rise and fall, of birth and death are perpetual and no exercise of imagination can change things to a discovery of "fullness of life".

Even God is dead in modern times as per [Friedrich Nietzsche](#). Since the Age of Reason, since we wiped the slate clean of any verifiable way to know things beyond experiment, Nietzsche lays the blame for God's death upon

us: *God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves . . . What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?*

Fatalism. *Your daughter has died; why trouble the teacher any longer?* That seems to be the attitude of those whom Jesus and his disciples meet when they arrive at Jairus' house; the attitude of many a rational scholar, media cynics, even poets like Philip Larkin: *Always too eager for the future, we / Pick up bad habits of expectancy. / Something is always approaching; every day / "Till then" we say. // . . . Only one ship is seeking us, a black / Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back / A huge and birdless silence. In her wake / No waters breed or break.*

And so commotion, *people weeping and wailing loudly*, as Mark says.

Jesus disengages from such a world, such a depressed crowd, from mourning translated into a big business – Taps to tap our tear ducts. He takes only his disciples and the girl's parents into the child's room, takes the child's hand, says, in what I suppose to be a more tender language, *Talitha koum – Little girl, I say to you, personally, arise!* And she did and we do too if we submit to his Eucharistic touch.

Into what room did Jesus take that select few? Out of the world of quid pro quo, of huge and birdless silence, where no waters breed or break, the same old commercials, the same old combat scripts . . . into a world of superabundance where people wake up out of their bad dreams to see that space between and beyond a quid pro quo existence unconcealed, a treasure unburied, a life unburied, a vision enhancing your hope thirtyfold or sixtyfold or even a hundred fold. Energized, more real than realism. This is about you, little girl.

Where is that room? Well the Church is fully equipped to be that unconcealed world of grace – or at least its vestibule.

Part Two: The cure of a woman impoverished by doctors.

I remember a doctor telling me that the best specialty among the medical professions is dermatology – because your patient never dies of it and it never goes away.

While Jesus is on his way to raise Jairus' daughter amid a great press of people, this distressed, almost frantically aggravated woman, agitated by a

persistent ailment, desperately reaches out merely to touch the fabric of Jesus' garment. How low her self-esteem, how shy of screaming out after so many years of frustration – educated as she was within the logic of equivalence to assume her ailment was something she deserved, she being a woman.

And it makes me think, have we not as Christians been reduced at times to “touching Christ's garment” without his noticing? When living up to Christ's logic of abundance, his dare that we go the extra mile, we falter, draw back into the logic of equivalence where in response to our confession of sin we expect a penance – quid pro quo – or even consequences more severe like Purgatory or fall back upon the relic of some saint or a medal of some sort or lighting a candle, in other words “touching the hem of Christ's garment” as an alternative to following him into his world where the logic of abundance might awaken us to what we really might be: another Christ, healers ourselves?

Well that's ok because Jesus is so ultrasensitive to your well-being, your transformation that he never misses even your fingering a miraculous medal. He's touched and insists on knowing personally the otherwise mere face in the crowd who touched him – namely you.

July 8, 2018 – 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A

Gospel Reading: Mark 6:1-6

Imagine yourself in the congregation of the Nazareth synagogue when Jesus comes to comment on a Scripture reading. And it's legitimate for you to imagine this because whenever this text is read, that moment of long ago is made present. So in comes Jesus from that way of Being he was sent to reveal: the logic of superabundance, of overflow, of grace which characterizes the realm of God.

You could even say he comes from that *no place* beyond Samaria and Jerusalem, that Utopia that leaves us not knowing what to do. If we resort to Luke's account of this moment we hear Jesus start off with the words: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor . . . to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.*

Hey! say his congregation; Hey! say we – this is a Jew of long ago, subject to historical criticism, traceable to a local family. He is a carpenter. Sure,

he has a reputation for restoring people to life, curing paralytics . . . blind people . . . but how much of that is hype. Whence and how does he have a reputation for wisdom. What are his credentials? And where is this Utopia to which he invites us? Why doesn't he just improve things in his hometown, make quality cabinets? To hell with dreamers!

In reaction to this, can you count yourselves among the few sick people of Nazareth whom he healed?

July 15th, 22nd, and 29th – General Survey of the remaining readings of July: Mark 6:7-13 (Jesus sends out his disciples); Jeremiah 23: 1-6 (I myself will gather the remnant of my sheep); Mark 6:30-34 and John 6: 1- 15 (the multiplication of loaves and fishes). Cycle A.

Mark 6: 7-13 - No baggage

In the course of these readings Jesus prepares his disciples for their peculiar mission of channeling people trapped in a quid pro quo culture as their norm; channeling them into Jesus' own realm of imaginative excess. And so it's no surprise that they exhibit detachment from the necessary baggage required by the logic of equivalence. Take no food, no suitcase, no money in your wallets, no change of clothes. In other words shed old habits for a life of wide open trust that unveilings, things concealed, gestures unforeseen will unfold, simple things like my experience with that bird and bird cage – “spur of the moment” awakenings.

Jeremiah 23:1-6 – Back to the meadow

Having been restrained by the Temple of old to fall back upon the seemingly prosperous ways of other nations, the economics of world empire, Jeremiah faults the shepherds who should have kept their minds wide open to continuing exoduses – into a seeming wilderness but ultimately into a land of promise. So now God will have to send a new shepherd to gather the remnant of his flock from all the ideologies . . . to bring them back to the meadow that lies all around them – if only grace can recapture a freshness of vision and behavior.

Mark 6:30-34 and John 6: 1- 15 – Loaves and fishes

Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.

What is this but Christ's invitation to depart for a while from a culture based on the logic of equivalence, cash, no tips, doing unto others as they do unto you . . . into the less inhabited, more animated world of the logic of

superabundance, the space in between and beyond, where we may dine informally together. His disciples, being of their usual mind of equivalence, wonder where they have enough resources to buy food for so large a crowd. ATM's are not easy to find in a desert. Philip adds it up: *Two hundred days' wages worth of food wouldn't be enough for each to have a bite or two. There's a boy here with five barley loaves and two fish – but what good is that to feed five thousand people?* Jesus has them all relax. They are in a different environment now, a different atmosphere, far from the marketplaces of the world they know. The crowd reclines, relaxes, draws nourishment from seemingly nothing at all! Of which twelve wicker baskets of fragments are left over. In the realm of the Sermon on the Mount's logic of superabundance, there is always an excess of Being and Becoming. We discover we are more than we think we are, more caring than we were taught to believe.

When snow falls against the window,
 Long sounds the evening bell...
 For so many has the table
 Been prepared, the house set in order.

From their wandering, many
 Come on dark paths to this gateway.
 The tree of grace is flowering in gold
 Out of the cool sap of the earth.

In stillness, wanderer, step in:
 Grief has worn the threshold into stone.
 But see: in pure light, glowing
 There on the table: bread and wine.

Georg Trakl