

Homily – June 16th, 2024 – 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The gospel ends with, ***“Jesus explained everything in private to his disciples.”*** Oh, great. We’re going to get it all explained to us as well. No! Mark, the gospel writer tells us that Jesus explained everything to them, but he doesn’t tell us what Jesus told them. Thank you very much. Maybe some of us, who have to put homilies together, would like an explanation, a bone thrown in our direction once in a while.



This is not the only time it happens this way. It’s also in the Emmaus story. That story has the Risen Jesus catching up with two distraught disciples who are sad. They are mourning the death of Jesus but don’t realize he is risen and is walking alongside them. The story goes on to say, ***“Then starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, Jesus***

explained to them the passages throughout the Scriptures that were about himself.” So, once again, they get it all cleared up for them, and we don’t get it cleared up for us.

It may not be as bad as I’m presenting it. Parables, stories, songs, poems, images and metaphors stay with us much longer than explanations ever will. In fact, sometimes explaining the story kills the story or the lesson it’s trying to convey. It’s much better that you go to the movie theatre and watch a movie for yourself than for me to explain to you what touched me about the movie when I saw it. Tell me a story; don’t explain it to me.

As a kid, while my mother was cooking supper in the kitchen, I wondered where my father was. I spied, through the crack of their bedroom door, my father on his knees next to the bed praying. Although it was short, I just told you a parable. I

have forgotten almost everything others have told me about prayer, including what priests have told me, but I've never forgotten that image of my father on his knees praying. No explanation was needed. In fact, an explanation would have cheapened the experience.

So, it was for this woman. It was one of the worst days of her life. Newly separated, she was tired, sick, lonely, hot, and discouraged. It was all she could do to lift her little boy into his highchair for dinner. She put his food on the tray and began to read the mail. Another bill she could not pay; it was the last straw. She leaned her head against the tray and began to cry. The little boy looked at his sobbing mother, then took the pacifier out of his mouth and offered it to his distraught mother. She began to laugh through her tears and hugged the source of such unconditional love.

Jesus is the Master storyteller. Apparently, he's asked 183 questions in the four gospels and gives explanations to only three. Explanations are good to help you pass exams, but they don't help you grow spiritually. Explanations are dead ends; parables take you on journeys of discovery.

Today, in the three Scripture readings, we have stories of something starting off small, trivial, and seemingly inconsequential that grows into something significant—the Kingdom of God. Many parables start off with the phrase “the Kingdom of God is like...” What Jesus is really describing is not a place (kingdom) but rather a person (God). In other words, a parable describes, or presents a scenario that illustrates what happens when God is totally in charge of life—a scary prospect for some of us.

I was telling a group of people the other night, at the “Theology on Tap” session, that each of us is a bit of a control freak in at least one area of our life. When we lose control, it's very disheartening and stressful. Today's scripture stories are all about relinquishing control, so that God's enduring work can take hold and multiply. It's what we trust in but don't see that keeps us going.

Ezekiel, in that first reading, was a prophet to exiled people. His own Jewish people, including himself at age 25, were deported from Israel to Babylon. He spent the rest of his life speaking words of hope, God's word, to people living as refugees. Without explaining the theology behind it, Ezekiel told them a story about how God was going to come to them in their misery. God would break off a twig from the topmost of a cedar tree in Babylon, where they were captive, and bring it to their homeland in Israel. This twig would be planted by God on the highest mountain in Israel and would grow into a noble cedar where every kind of bird (every kind of nationality—not only the Jewish captives) will find a home there. They held onto the story of what God was doing for them, and 50 years later they indeed returned home. The story sustained them for 50 hard years and beyond.

Paul in that second reading is going through his own trial. And like the Jews in Ezekiel's time, probably wanted to give up. But, instead of throwing up his hands in defeat, Paul said, "I'm going to **walk by faith and not by sight**. I'm going to trust God and God's plan even though I see nothing of it in front of me. Paul's opponents in Corinth were convinced that this bodily existence is an obstacle to union with Jesus. Paul says, "Yes, I agree that union with Jesus in the afterlife is the ideal, but whether I am away from the Lord (at home in this earthly body) or I'm with the Lord (after death and in heaven), I want to do everything I can possibly do to please the Lord and give glory to the Lord right here, right now. I put my life in God's hands. I surrender to the Lord and want only to do what gives God glory. Presently, I see only pain, struggle, and darkness, but secretly the Lord is making something wonderful out of the pain, struggle and darkness, so I walk by faith and not by sight into the middle of it all.

Finally, we get a similar image of God in the gospel, the God who delights in taking what we want to give up on and making something wonderful from it. When the man scatters seed on the ground, his work is done. He now has to move into the world of trust and surrender. While he sleeps the **seed sprouts and grows without his knowing how**. After planting, the farmer does nothing to help it along. What is God's reign like? If it depends on human effort, we risk failure. If we, on the other

hand, choose to trust God instead of relying on ourselves, unimaginable success can occur.

The essence of the Church is really about doing little things with great love, day in and day out. That's how the Reign of God comes about. Trying to control the growth of any seed will not contribute to its growth.

Ezekiel couldn't free the exiles, but he told them a story about how God was planting a tree of hope, a cedar, back in their homeland. The story sustained their hope.

Paul couldn't straighten out the wayward Corinthians, but he told them a story about how he walks by faith and not by sight. The story sustained them.

Jesus told his disciples that while they were small and wondered whether they should give up on the Kingdom of God, they shouldn't. He was going to make of them first a seed, then a stalk, then a head, then the full grain in the head. Their lives and their faith would be the seeds of generations to come. It was enough to sustain them.

A little boy secretly sees his father at prayer. It was enough to sustain him. I no longer need the explanations Jesus gave to some of his disciples. The stories are much more satisfying.

~ Fr. Phil