

Homily - November 3, 2024 – 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Back in 2003, while on a sabbatical year, I drove from Toronto to Tucson, Arizona to go on a retreat. What spurred me on to drive the 3600 km was the title of the retreat: “The Soul Tells A Story.” It was a retreat for writers, editors,



publishers and, if you happened to be a priest, you could come too. So I went. Ever since then, I’ve had a secret passion to write. From that time on, I’ve discovered many books and even more YouTube videos all jam-packed with helpful information about the do’s and don’ts of successful writing. The one common practice that all these successful writers or editors agree upon is this: SHOW, DON’T TELL. Don’t simply tell your readers that a certain character in your novel is neurotic; show his neurosis being acted out. Don’t tell your readers that a character was embarrassed; show her in an embarrassing situation. If you simply tell, without showing, you kill the intrigue in your reader. Showing keeps them engrossed in your characters, and if your characters are people your readers can relate to, they will want to read more.

I’ve also learned that there is no such thing as pure fiction. Every character in a book of fiction is based indirectly on someone the author has already experienced in their life. So, many of you I’ve already sized up for a cameo appearance in a book I’m working on.

If you had at least one good teacher, in either grade school or high school, that teacher wasn't just interested in the answers you gave but in the process of how you came to that answer. That teacher was interested in the logical sequence that was going on in your head that led you to the correct answer. My high school chemistry teacher would name a molecule and ask each student in turn, we were to say if that chemical was an acid or a base. You had a 50/50 chance of guessing correctly. Most of us, including myself, were trying to make lucky guesses. If I said, "base" when the correct answer was "acid," I could quickly read the expression on the teacher's face and say, "I meant to say acid." Praise would always come out of the teacher's mouth with, "You got it!" The truth was that I didn't get anything. I hadn't done the homework you might say. I was telling him the correct answer, but I couldn't show why it was so. There was no depth to my answer, no depth to my understanding. It was all surface-level guessing.

My youngest sibling, Todd, who is 50 and humble as a mouse, shared this story with me just recently about something that happened to him in grade school. He was in grade two and another sibling, Matthew, was in grade six. Matthew's grade six teacher, Mr. Carroll, was frustrated and disappointed with his students as he handed back their dismal math test. The marks were low, the students clearly didn't apply themselves; they obviously weren't doing their homework. So Mr. Carroll said to my brother Matthew, "Go down and get your brother, Todd, from his grade-two class and bring him here." Todd was seven years old and quite nervous to be in a grade-six class, where everyone, especially the teacher, loomed like giants. To make things worse, the entire math test that was given the day before was on the blackboard and Todd was asked to solve the equations. He did so

without a single mistake. In grade two, he was functioning at a grade six level. He didn't just get the right answers, he *showed* the teacher how he got them. That was 42 years ago. Matthew, to this day, still says to Todd, "Thanks, Todd, for making me and my classmates look like dummies."

Many of the gospel stories start off with a scribe or a Pharisee approaching Jesus with a question with the sole purpose of trying to make Jesus look like a dummy. They want to trap him. Not so with the religious leader in today's gospel. Not all religious leadership rejects Jesus. This scribe really wants to grow in his faith. His question comes from a good place within him. He wants Jesus to tell him the answer to the following question, "***Which commandment is the first of all?***" Now the Jewish faith, at the time, had 613 commands and prohibitions that were tied to the 10 Commandments. We as Catholics have 1752 canons—laws you might say—that make up the Code of Canon Law. (I wonder what Jesus would have to say to Church leaders today!). This scribe who seeks out Jesus isn't lazy when it comes to his Jewish faith. He wasn't looking for the most important law so that he could simply ditch the other 612. What he wanted to know is whether there was a unifying principle that could help and support him as he sifted through the complexity of all these laws. Most of us, if we're not legalists, want to know the same thing. I want to know, "What's at the heart of all the rules and regulations that we hold onto so dearly and that sometimes divide us so bitterly? What's it all about at the end of the day?"

Jesus answers the scribe by first saying, "***Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.***" That doesn't sound like any of the Code of Canon Law to me. The

first commandment, the one from which all others flow, concerns the one God. Divine oneness is absolute. Our goal is to imitate this oneness by bringing all that we are—our heart, mind, soul, and strength—into loving communion with God. Out of that will flow both the love of neighbour and love of self to such a point that the lines become blurred. When you don't know if your love is love of God or love of neighbour, or love of self—and you don't particularly care—you are, in the words of Jesus, ***“Not far from the Kingdom of God.”***

The scribe, in all his sincerity, was looking for a head answer. He wanted to know which commandment, of all the laws out there, is first of all. Jesus didn't answer his head. Instead, Jesus answered the man's heart. He invited the scribe to enter the depth of his own soul, for the Soul Tells A Story, and he would find the answer there.

Often we use the terms soul and spirit to mean the same thing; they aren't. Soul means depth. Spirit refers to height. Doing soul work is hard. It's about going into deep places within ourselves, often dark and broken places. But if we dare to go there, we'll also find Jesus there, the one who heals our wounds and makes our spirits soar. Going into our soul is like doing homework we don't often want to do. I think this scribe has done his homework and, for that, Jesus praises him.

A few years ago, a gas station, on the corner of Vaughn Harvey Blvd. and Collishaw St. in Moncton was torn down. In the empty lot weeds grew wildly and garbage accumulated. The other day I stopped to help a 30-something-year-old homeless man who was in this abandoned lot. He was dirty, his clothes were torn and

shabby, and his life's possessions were crammed into a grocery cart. Before he notice me approaching, I noticed him picking up not discarded bottles or cans but the smallest pieces of garbage and putting them in a large garbage bag. Except for the weeds, the place was spotless. I wondered why has was doing this, especially since there were no cans or bottle to cash in.

I extended money and a handshake to him and asked him his name. He said his name was Daniel. He probably thought I was a plain-clothed City of Moncton bylaw officer wanting him to move on. Without me asking, he said, "Nobody asked me to do clean this lot up. I'm trying to overcome an addiction. I need to clean the outside (pointing to the abandoned lot) so that I can start cleaning the addiction inside of me (pointing to his heart)." Then he said, "Thank you," and "God bless you."

The inner and the outer for Daniel is one. "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Daniel knows that the love of God's creation, the love of neighbour, and the love of self is all one love. To take care of one is to take care of them all.

As I walked away, the words Jesus said to the scribe immediately came to me, "You, Daniel, are not far from the kingdom of God."

~Fr. Phil