

Fr. Mike Homily—June 17, 2018
Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

One spring morning during my first year of priesthood I arrived at church to preside at the daily mass. As in most parishes, the daily mass people were a relatively small but extremely regular and faithful bunch. Most everyone knew everybody else. One of those people was a woman who was about 70 years old then. Her brother was a priest and a professor at Notre Dame. He was visiting her that day and concelebrated mass with me. My homily that morning tried to distinguish faith as more like art and not like math. As I said, art doesn't have to "mean" any one single thing, while math—at least as I then understood it—requires one and only one "correct" answer for any question that is proposed about a problem. I thought it was a good homily. I sat down.

Just after that, during the prayers of petition, I invited the people in church to add any of their own intentions out loud, since that was the custom back then. With a twinkle in her eye and a smile on her face, this 70 year old woman said, "I'd like to pray for my brother, Fr. John" (who was sitting next to me), and then after a perfect pause she added, "the math professor."

Fr. John is now deceased, but that woman remains a dear friend to this day, more than 25 years later. I'm going to admit that I am not any scholar in math or science, but I am going to double down on the main point of the homily that day. It was not to proclaim that math teachers don't have faith (and my friend well knew that), but it was and is to say that you don't approach questions of faith as if you were trying to solve a geometry equation or a calculus proof. I suspect that Fr. John knew that better than anyone, though he was gracious enough to just not say anything that day.

In other words, you don't confront the questions of God and God's kingdom by asking "What's the singular correct answer here? What is the clear, simple description?" Faith cannot provide so-called "solutions" like that. It's an entirely different kind of seeking.

And if you are tempted to wonder whether any of this makes any difference for us in real life, let me remind you that this week the Attorney General of the United States of America defended the practice of the government forcibly separating parents from their children—on appeal to St. Paul's letter to the Romans. Incredible! But if one reads the Bible as a manual of solutions—literal solutions—to the problems we confront every day, that's the kind of contorted answers one gets. And it means, under the same sort of logic, that after last week's gospel we all ought to be plucking out our eyes and chopping off our hands and feet. When our sacred scriptures become confused with a kind of science manual, the very worst kinds of sins can be justified on appeal to a false kind of "faith." And that same sort of confused interpretation means that when we think about what the kingdom of God is like we should be imagining it—according to today's Gospel—as a farm field or a mustard plant, where we'll spend eternity. After all, that's what it said it is, right?

Of course that it ridiculous on a literal level. That's not how to seek the meaning of a parable, and Jesus was deliberately teaching the crowds in parables. So if God's kingdom doesn't mean walking the corn or sitting in the shade of a shrub, what does it mean? Now there's the question!

And the answer, like art, can't be boiled down to one singular definition, because we are speaking here about God, Holy Mystery, and things far deeper and more invisible to us than can be merely recited literally.

And that helps to explain the otherwise rather strange and disturbing sounding conclusion to today's Gospel, the part where Jesus is said to have conversed with his own disciples about the rich meaning of his parables in a way that he refused to do for the rest of the crowd. What could be the reason for that? Is the kingdom only meant for a chosen few? The very fact that such a question unsettles us is already the answer to it. Because we already know Jesus. Not yet perfectly or even well enough, but we do know him—enough to know that this is not a correct answer to our question, enough to know that Jesus isn't like that. Jesus hasn't come only to enlighten the lucky elite.

It is important to notice here that the gospel distinguishes between "the crowds" and "the disciples." That is not a distinction between 12 men and everyone else out there. Rather, it is the distinction between those who have chosen to open their hearts in search of the relationship with God that Jesus offers, and those who see Jesus as a mere curiosity or object of neutral inquiry.

In the world of college education there is a distinction made between the study of theology and the world of what is called "religious studies." Theology presumes that you are already starting out as a believer, or are at least trying to do that. Religious studies presumes that you are a detached social scientist, evaluating things that religious people do, but never having to make a specific commitment of faith yourself—to pursue one path rather than all others. So the so-called "disciples" in this gospel—and I hope every person here, are theologians rather than mere students of religion. We are people who already know and trust in Jesus before we ever enter into the questions of understanding, and there are hundreds of millions of us on the planet right now—some who are formally trained and most of whom are not. We are the disciples, the theologians, because we already know and strive to follow him, however imperfectly.

So to return to the parables today. What do they mean? By their very nature they can and do mean many things—like art. We don't have to seek out and settle on that one particular dictionary definition. After all, we are in pursuit of a person, a Divine Person, not a math solution. About what person can it ever be said, "He or she means this, and nothing else." That's a crazy statement on its face because it's completely missed the point.

To those of us who already have decided to follow Jesus, more wisdom and understanding will be given us. To those of us who have not first made the decision, utterances like Jesus' parables will sound like so much baffling verbiage. And if we can't always settle on what parables must mean, we certainly recognize what they do not mean...like, mutilate yourself. Or like, Jesus approves of destroying children and families for the sake of government law enforcement. These are not the conclusions of people who have actually known this savior. We do know him, or at least are trying our best to do that. We must speak what we know.