

"The Unforced Rhythms of Grace"

Matthew 11:25-30

June 2, 2019

The Unforced Rhythms of Grace: We delight in them each and every Sunday. We hear the children laugh and play, and we encourage them. We greet our friends and our visitors with steady eyes and warm smiles, knowing the gift that is spiritual community. We lift the cup and we are nourished in the bread, because we want to experience what those closest to Jesus felt as he ministered to them. All of it is grace; all of it is our footloose dance of joy. Hear what the Spirit says to the church in this tender passage from Matthew's Gospel, the 11th Chapter, beginning with the 25th verse:

Abruptly Jesus broke into prayer: "Thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth. You've concealed your ways from sophisticates and know-it-alls, but spelled them out clearly to ordinary people. Yes, Father, that's the way you like to work."

Jesus resumed talking to the people, but now tenderly. "The Father has given me all these things to do and say. This is a unique Father-Son operation, coming out of Father and Son intimacies and knowledge. No one knows the Son the way the Father does, nor the Father the way the Son does. But I'm not keeping it to myself; I'm ready to go over it line by line with anyone willing to listen."

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

Parables are simple and short stories that seek to teach a moral lesson or to create in us an ethical dilemma. They were the primary teaching tool of Jesus, who largely spoke to two kinds of listeners: those who had no ears to hear him, and those who heard him but had little grounding in what he was teaching them. This creates a momentary distraction for me, as it may for you, as I wonder in which one of these two groups am I most often found?

Some experts claim Jesus spoke in parables so as to protect himself from being condemned by the Pharisees. If so, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to conclude that plan didn't work out so well for him! When we hear the term, "parable," we might think of the story of the *Good Samaritan*, used by Jesus to posit the ethical and moral question, "Who is my neighbor?" Or, when we hear the parable of the *Woman at the Well* as we did a couple of weeks ago, we are asked to consider, "Who is welcome in the community of Christ?" Jesus uses his stories to invite us into the dance—*his dance*—of the unforced rhythms of grace.

But the use of parable isn't restricted to the Gospels and Jesus. In secular settings also, parables are used for a common purpose as in the Bible—to put us into direct conflict with our time-worn predilections and prejudices.

Franz Kafka, a Jewish German writing in Austria at the beginning of the 20th century, created a parable entitled, *Before the Law*. Kafka's

recurrent protagonist is talking with a priest. The priest tells him a story about a man that comes to a great barrier seeking the Law. Positioned before the door is a gatekeeper that tells him he can't be allowed to enter at that moment. The man seeking the Law is perplexed, but intentional, so he waits, and waits and waits for the entirety of his life to be permitted to access the Law.

The gatekeeper also waits and allows the man to continue waiting, but not letting him pass through the gate. As the man is dying, he wonders why he was the only person seeking the Law. The gatekeeper tells him that the gate he guards was only meant for him and since he is dying, he, the gatekeeper is going to close it. Kafka then engages the priest that has related this tale to him in an analytic argument about the meaning of the story.

Avkrishna Rao explains the meaning of the story:

Before the Law is a clear narrative of human life. We come to a point in our lives in which we seek purpose and order, yet we are obstructed from this by our own minds (our gatekeepers if you will). We want health, while declining in well-being, we want youth, while growing ever aged, we need love, yet never finding it. If we do, it's ephemeral and soon to be lost. There is no constant, permanent principle to guide us in life. We seek a reason, a Law if you will, that will help us, and thus we seek it, but discover our path is obscured by ourselves!

I thought of Kafka's parable as I was preparing to show you today's film, "Footloose." Produced in 1984, this film is about the folly of trying to legislate morality. It is a parable; in that it is a simple story meant to put us into conflict with the modern—and now post-modern angst of our times. We sit before the door of knowledge, asking the gatekeeper to allow us insight into the questions, "What is going on with our young people today?" and "Why have our moral systems of conduct broken down?" Alas, it is the nature of parable to rarely feed us the answer, content to make us wait for eternity outside the door of the Law. Eventually, we pass away, and the door closes forever on our quest for what is ultimate truth.

In "Footloose," a small town is controlled by one man's stoic determination to force its youth to submit to the yoke of his holy authority. He is the town minister and everyone in town goes to the church he leads. He also serves on the School Board and the Town Council. He has his hands and will in every power-pot there is. He even rules his own household with an iron rigidity that keeps his faithful preacher-wife in check and his teenage daughter under his protective watch.

This all comes as a result of a car accident some years earlier that claimed the lives of several teenagers, including the couple's

son. Convinced that a breakdown in morality was responsible for his child's death, Rev. Moore goes on a rampage to shut down the forces of nature that he sees plaguing the town's youth—music and dancing, which he connects directly with immorality-- drugs, alcohol, and promiscuity. He's already lost one child, so he overprotects the other one with a broad, sweeping hand over all the youth in his parish and his town. As he protests to his wife, "I'm responsible for the spiritual life of this community!"

Rev. Moore is like the man who sits at the Gate of the Law, patiently waiting to be rewarded for his faithfulness. He has not been emotionally healthy in grieving the loss of his son; instead, he stuffs this great loss, refusing to confront it. Rev. Moore bullies ahead, determined that he will not lose his daughter to the same fate. But he *is* losing his daughter. While he sits at the gate staring down his own created gatekeeper, his daughter can't get through to him; she reacts to her own loss of brother and father by rebelling against him and his enforced morality.

Jesus invites us into his unforced rhythms of grace. The upstart young man who brings dancing back to the town says to the Good Reverend, "I don't know why my dad left me. I don't know why your son left you. I just know we are the ones that are supposed to keep on living." He gets what Jesus was saying though he has no formal

grounding in the Gospels, while the one whose life is devoted to getting Christ's message has lost his ears to hear.

Eventually, we all have passed away, and the door has closed forever on our quest for what is the meaning of life. Was it a waste of our time to wait with the gatekeeper in hopes of being granted entrance into the Law? Did we learn anything at all sitting outside and wishing we were allowed a glimpse of ultimate truth? If we have ears to hear, let us listen for those unforced rhythms of grace in God's world calling for us, and let us give thanks for the young people who will teach us how to dance again.

May it Be So.