

Jennifer and I were down in the Willamette Valley last week. We spent a part of each day at Mt. Angel Abbey, where I am an oblate – a sort of monastic who lives outside the cloister.

I want to tell you a story, but first you need some background. Mt. Angel is a Benedictine monastery that chooses to practice as Roman Catholics. Some of the monks hold strictly to Roman Catholic doctrine and others question it. So, Fr. Abbot Joseph had to figure out a way for me to take communion at the Mass. That made it possible for me to join the community without leaving the Anglican church.

Over the years, Abbot Joseph and I became good friends. Whenever I came to the Abbey, he sought me out and we talked and laughed. He loved finding ways to follow the rules and also make them flexible.

One gorgeous sunny morning last week, as we stood at his tombstone, I remembered one of my favorite moments with Abbot Joseph. He caught up with me having lunch with some of the monks. “I have to tell you something hilarious!” he said.

Seems that a week or so earlier, one of the monks had been leading a retreat for a group of Methodist ministers. Something had happened that the monk had to tell both the Abbot and the Diocesan Bishop.

About halfway through the retreat, a couple of the Methodist ministers came to the monk. “We know we can’t join you in taking communion in the Mass in the Abbey church,” one of them said, “but we feel so close to you that we hoped you might join us for communion downstairs in the chapel.”

In telling the story to the Bishop, the monk said, “The first thing I noticed is that I didn’t immediately say no!” “Well,” the Bishop asked, “what did you do?” “I went to my room that night,” the monk said, “and I prayed and I prayed. And then that goofy little phrase popped into my head. The one from that bracelet that people were wearing for a while. You know,” said the monk, “the one that said, ‘What would Jesus do?’”

And before the monk could even finish the sentence, the Bishop blurted out, “You didn’t do it, did you?”

Abbot Joseph laughed. It is a funny story. And it’s also a teaching story about human nature. Abbot Joseph was not laughing at Roman Catholic doctrine. No, he went to his grave loving the Roman church. What delighted him was the story of a little human foible that is true of us all.

Over time, we relax into those explanations that work for us. We trust those interpretations that work *until*, that is, until we encounter something that presents an unforeseen misfit; an experience that exposes us to deeper, more inclusive truth.

Abbot Joseph wasn't ridiculing Roman Catholic doctrine any more than Jesus was ridiculing Jewish doctrine. Jesus *challenged* the chief priests and the elders of the temple. Not because they were Jews, but because they were putting their trust in institutional authority rather than in God.

Just before this passage, Jesus had ridden into town on a donkey right into the temple, the very center of Jewish life. He drove out people who were selling and buying sacrificial animals, knocked over the money-changers' tables and called the temple a "den of robbers." He spent the night outside the city, woke up hungry and cursed a fruitless fig tree that immediately withered.

And that's where our reading this morning picks up the action.

So, you can see why those in charge of keeping order in the temple might be wondering who this country rabbi thought he was. Now, there's nothing wrong with keeping order. Every organization, religious or otherwise, develops patterns and rules that generate the consistency an organization needs to pursue its purpose.

To stay alive, every organization also needs innovators. The more diversity of perspectives an organization has, the more creativity it has to explore new ideas, to make unfamiliar connections and to pioneer previously unseen approaches to pursuing their purpose.

These sensibilities work together like a river. Consistency and conformity serve like riverbanks to provide stability and direction. Innovation and novelty serve like the flow of water to provide movement and life. Without the banks, there is only a sheet of water. Without the water, there is only a dry gulch. Together, the banks move the river toward the sea even as the water changes the shape and motion of the river.

Ironically, it seems that in every organization, perhaps especially in religious organizations, there is a natural tension as though one of these was "correct" and the other "incorrect." When innovation-seeking religious people feel overly constrained, they may try to correct or reject the structures of the church with reform movements. When stability-seeking religious people feel overly threatened, they may try to correct or condemn new approaches.

Neither of these is a problem unless people become extreme and entrench themselves in self-righteousness.

There is a middle way.

Life is always in motion and it also requires a certain stability. Flow and structure are gifts to each other, if we learn to see them that way. “Flexible stability” characterizes the attitude that Paul described to the Philippians; a perspective that avoids selfish ambition or conceit, and that instead includes considering other perspectives, rather than insisting on the exclusive righteousness of our own.

In Matthew’s Gospel story, the chief priests and elders have become fixated on who is authoritatively correct. They try to trap Jesus with a question. And Jesus responds with a question of his own, but he is not trying to embarrass or trap them. There *is* a correct answer, but Jesus is rarely interested in *correct* answers to his questions. Instead, Jesus asks questions to interrupt habitual thought patterns; questions that open minds to transformation.

For centuries, Christians have intentionally or unintentionally preached this Gospel parable as a story about Jesus *correcting* the Jews. Not only does that interpretation stimulate anti-Jewish ideas and actions with tragic consequences, it completely misses the point of the parable.

In fact, the parable Jesus offers *confirms* what Jewish tradition teaches: What we say matters, but what matters *more* is how and why we act.

People who act on what God has taught them *are* more fruitful than those who respond positively, but don’t follow through. But Jesus is actually emphasizing the role of changing one’s mind. Or, as Paul put it to the Philippians, letting the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus.

When the tax collectors and prostitutes heard John the Baptizer, they trusted and changed their minds. The chief priests and elders knew that John was a righteous man, but did not change their minds. They endorse the actions of the first son in the parable, but more like the second son, they cannot or will not change their minds.

Jewish tradition still teaches that how we think influences how we live. And loyalty to our own perspective is limiting. Self-righteously demanding either unrelenting change or needless consistency comes at a high price. We remove ourselves from the river of life and from encountering deeper currents that could carry us to greater insights, broader forgiveness and genuine redemption.

There is a middle way.

Paul's letter to the Christ-followers in Philippi is a hymn to that middle way; a poem to a pattern of thinking and living that is grounded in the way of Jesus the Christ. This pattern of harmony and humility is the same attitude – the same mind – that was in Christ Jesus.

We learn perspectives and patterns that help us to see the presence of the Holy Spirit. But these are limited – *a/ways* limited, even at their very best. So, when we attach ourselves to one perspective, we can completely miss actions of the Holy Spirit; we can misjudge that which our minds are not ready to receive.

Fortunately, we can practice holding our perspectives and knowledge lightly. With more flexible minds and attitudes, we are better prepared to discern Divine activity. With more flexible minds, we can trust our perspective with our awareness open to what lies beyond our grasp.

The more we can adopt the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, the more we can give our “yes” to God, *and* the more our lives embody the harmony and humility of Christ.

We don't do this to get into heaven. We don't do this to prove that we are correct. We don't do this to rescue anyone.

We adopt the same mind that was in Christ Jesus so that our lives invite people into God's river of harmony and humility; into the realm of life and love that God has prepared for all creation.

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