

The Risks and Rewards of Holy Foolishness

I have in my library at home a book titled, “Young’s Analytical Concordance of the Bible.” It is the most comprehensive, exhaustive and accurate concordance of the Bible ever published.

A concordance is an alphabetical index of every word in a book. This book has every Greek and every Hebrew word in the Bible, over 300,000 references. I’ve had this book for over sixty years. I seldom ever consult it but can’t bear to part with it.

I wanted to see how many times the word “fool” in some form appears in the Bible.

The pages of this book consist of three tightly packed columns per page with each column having over a hundred entries. The word “fool” fills four such columns - so well over 400 times.

As is true for so many words, “fool” comes from a Latin word that referred to a blacksmith’s bellows. A fool was a “windbag” or “an empty headed person.”

I thought of that while working on the story we call the Parable of the Prodigal Son. All three characters in the story act like fools.

The younger son was a fool to demand his share of inheritance that would become his when his father died. He certainly was a violator of religious law. He did not honor his father. Then, he went away and lived foolishly.

The father himself behaves foolishly. He gives this young scalawag what he asks for. He gives up his status and standing as patriarch in the family.

In that world there was a social map that everyone knew and followed. This map told people who they were, who they were related to, how to act and react, how to behave. At the center of this map was the family, especially the father. Then came the village and, then, the world beyond.

When he goes out running to meet the wayward son coming home, he acts like a fool. Men of his status and stature simply did not behave that way.

Then, of course, the character who goes by the label, the “elder brother” acts like a fool by excluding himself from what is perhaps the central meaning of the story, a great celebration and an experience of the reassembly of this family that has been torn asunder.

I thought about the song written by Johnny Mercer and made famous by Frank Sinatra and also by Elvis, “Fools Rush in

Where Angels Fear to Tread.” It’s a love song, of course, and so is this parable a love story, a radical love story.

The song’s lyrics are, in part:

Fools rush in, where angels fear to tread
And so I come to you my love
My heart above my head
Though I see the danger there
If there’s a chance for me
Then I don’t care

Fools rush in, where wise men never go
But wise men never fall in love
So how are they to know
When we met, I felt my life begin
So open up your heart and let
This fool rush in

You may or may not be aware that very likely since the invention of the first religious rituals and religions, there have been those labeled as fools. Just to confine it to the Jewish/Christian arena, the Hebrew prophets were looked at as fools.

Certainly some of the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures seemed to behave foolishly. Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for about three years predicting a forthcoming captivity in Egypt. The prophet Ezekiel lay before a stone, which symbolized

beleaguered Jerusalem and though God instructed him to eat bread baked on human waste, Ezekiel asked to use cow dung instead. Don't hear many sermons preached on either one of these scenes.

Hosea married a prostitute to symbolize the infidelity of Israel before God. Jeremiah walked around with the yoke of an ox on his neck.

Some took Paul's admonition to become fools for Christ's sake literally and started a movement called "holy fools." These people often used shocking and unconventional behavior to challenge accepted norms or to deliver prophetic statements. Paul talks a lot about how the so-called wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight.

One of the most famous examples in Western Christianity is that of Francis of Assisi who before a large crowd stripped naked, gave away all his possessions and focused on preaching in the streets to anyone who would listen.

The other mystic who behaved foolish by our standards is Julian of Norwich. She wrote the best known surviving book in the English language written by a mystic, "Revelations of Divine Love." It is the first book written in English by a known woman author. In 1373 she became seriously ill and on what she thought was her deathbed she received a series of visions. Here is the

foolish part. For much of her life she lived in permanent seclusion in a cell which was attached to the church.

In the Orthodox tradition “holy fools” have played a significant role. The Cathedral of St. Basil in Moscow is named after one such “holy fool: “Blessed Basil of Moscow, Fool for Christ.” In the Orthodox tradition they have a name for such saints - “yurodivy.”

Nietzsche is the one who is given credit for saying, “Those who dance are considered insane by those who can’t hear the music.”

Then, there is Jesus, who took his life and threw it away for the world he loved and the people he thought should have full membership and participation in it. One of the ways he did it was by telling stories that ended up getting him killed. His best known one begins, “Once there was a fellow who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that is coming to me.” So the Father divided the estate between the two boys.

Before going further I want to get two things out onto the table.

First, the word “prodigal” means “extravagant.” A prodigal is someone who is reckless or extravagant. There is some sort of extravagance on the part of all of the characters in this story. We get the words “prodigious” and “prodigy” from the same root. A prodigy is someone who shows an extraordinary talent and at

unexpected time. I have taken it for granted that everyone knows what the word means.

Another, more accurate and less confusing title we could give to this parable is, “the story of the compassionate father and his two lost sons.”

The second thing to note is that there have been countless numbers of books written about the parables of Jesus. Some of them, of course, are worthless. Pablum. Some of them are so scholarly as to be virtually out of reach except for someone highly trained in language and history.

I own several books on the parables. One by Brandon Scott, titled “Hear Then the Parable.” And one by Klyne Snodgrass “Stories with Intent.” The other that I will mention is by Robert Capon and is titled “Kingdom, Grace, and Judgement: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus.”

Brandon Scott is a member of the Jesus Seminar and his book is, likely, the most comprehensive study of the parables in half a century. John Dominic Crossan said that the book “is a superb synthesis of where we have come from in terms of literary analysis and where we are going in terms of social analysis.” The book by Snodgrass is the most comprehensive study of the parables you could every hope to read. It analyzes the various ways the parables of Jesus over the centuries as well as a very comprehensive bibliography.

The Capon book and the man is also worth knowing about. He was an Episcopal priest and fairly prolific author. His book, “Supper of the Lamb” is about everything from prayer to poetry to puff pastry.

And, to further complicate matters, there have also been countless books written about this parable alone. I typed into my search engine “books on the parable of the prodigal son” and instantly got fifty two so-called “best selling” books on just this parable alone.

Remember also that this parable is just one story Jesus used to answer his critics about why he practiced radical inclusion. It is not an exhaustive commentary on whatever we mean when we use the word “God.” In this parable God is personal, welcoming, compassionate. There are also parables where God is presented as being absent. And, parables where one is encouraged to search for God. In keeping with our theme of paradox and contradiction, I would say that Sacred Mystery is present, personal, absent, is seeking and desires to be sought - all at the same time.

Can you hear me okay?

Are you sure?

Are you here?

Are you sure?

You tolerate the kind of stuff I've been offering so far today. But, the moment I utilize a good story, your attention goes up. Good stories entertain, inform, involve and motivate us. A good story-teller can abduct us and take us into another world. You know how easy it is for our bodies to be here but our hearts and minds to be a thousand miles away. That's why I asked, "Are you here? Are you sure?"

A good story can create a reality that is more real than real. As the native-American story-teller would say at the beginning of a story, "I don't know if this really happened or not, but I now it is true."

Jesus was a master story-teller. In and with his stories he forced people, as I hope we are forced, to see the world, themselves and others from new angles. His stories conveyed messages that could not be easily evaded. I'm thinking especially of his story we call "the parable of the Good Samaritan." He told it to people who thought that the only truly "good Samaritan" was a "dead Samaritan."

Are the parables of Jesus so complex that they require the kind of attention we are giving to this one? The answer is both "yes" and "no."

I heard about these two guys who went into their favorite bar and ordered drinks all around for everyone. When asked what the joyous occasion was they said, “We just finished a jigsaw puzzle in just two days.” The bartender said, “A lot of people worked jigsaw puzzles during the shut down in probably less time than that.” “Yeah?” said one of the guys. “On the box this said between two and five years.”

The parables are not jigsaw puzzles with over a thousand pieces. They were first told to people who likely could not even read. If they were not clear and compelling, they would not have been remembered nor become as loved as much as they are.

Yes, we are still scratching our heads over some of them but they are not complex. Puzzling, perhaps. But, not complex.

What is complex about them is the context in which they were told and the mind-set of both the person who told them and those who first heard them. We do not come at these stories out of anything remotely like that context. To understand any of the parables well we have to keep in mind, or learn about all sorts of things - ancient agricultural assumptions, wedding customs, relations of slaves and masters, the crucial importance of the family and belonging system, as well as Judaism and its history.

The men and woman who were our spiritual ancestors were not wrapped up in the technological world in which we are. They

were middle-eastern and did not think like we do not acquire knowledge like we do.

They had two ways of experiencing and expressing the Sacred. The scholars refer to these two modalities as “mythos” and “logos.” Both were regarded as essential and each was used to “get at” the truth.

Each had its own area of competence.

“Myth” was regarded as primary. Myth was concerned with what was thought to be timeless and constant. Myth looked back to the origins of life, to the foundations of culture, to the deepest levels of the human mind. Myth was not concerned with practical matters. Myth was concerned with meaning.

This is why you are here is my guess. It is certainly why I am involved in this work. We seek to live meaningful lives. As you know, I’m always recommending books to read and the one books I find myself recommending over and over again is Jim Hollis’ book, “Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life.”

What is the point of life? What is my life about. Where am I heading? How can I bring enlarged being into the world? How can I continue to grow.

People who don’t have useful answers to these questions fall into despair.

The “mythos” of a society provided people with a context that made sense of their lives. It directed people’s attention to the eternal and universal.

Mythos is also deeply rooted in the unconscious, in the collective unconscious. When people told stories about heroes who descended into the underworld and fought with monsters, they were bringing to light that which is unconscious in us all.

None of this is accessible to purely rational investigation but it nonetheless has a profound effect on our experience and behavior. All of us can be captured by those deep forces from the unconscious that cause us to live lives as either heroes or to be very destructive, both to self and others.

Myths require rituals to keep them alive and active.

This is a picture of a Chopin Prelude. Like it? Does this alone provide a musical experience? No. Does it satisfy? No. Unless you are a musical savant just looking at the music would be abstract if not incredible. The music needs to be interpreted instrumentally before we can appreciate it.

Our spiritual ancestors had a very different view of history than we do. They were much less interested in what happened than in the meaning of what happened.

If, for example, you told someone in the first century that Jesus was born of a virgin, so what? After all, their current savior and God, Augustus, had been born of a miraculous union between Apollo and his mother when Apollo turned into a snake and crawled into his mother when she slept at night. Interaction between gods and humans was common.

“Logos” was equally important. “Logos” was the rational, pragmatic and scientific thought that allowed people to function well in the world.

Are you here?

We have virtually lost the mythos in our time and we have made logos, logic, the basis of our society. Of course, in order for logos to work, it must be accurate. It must relate to life as it is.

So, there was a time when myth and logic went hand in hand. Each was indispensable. They were distinct. But, only as distinct as the “head” and “tail of a coin. You couldn’t have one without the other. Each had a job to do. Each had its limitations. Logic, for example, can’t deal with human pain, suffering, sorrow. It can’t tell us about the ultimate value of life. That’s the business of myth, of stories, of parables.

I know this is not a graduate school seminar but doing this brief series of three of the parables of Jesus, is intended to be a

preparation for a deep dive into the Gospel of John which is one long parable, if you will.

By the 18th century people of Europe and, then, America, had achieved such astounding success in science and technology that we began to think that logic was the only way to truth. Myth began to be discounted as false and superstitious.

Any time anyone anywhere tries to turn myth into fact it leads to problems. Not just small problems but the kind of difficulties that make people go hate and kill for their sacred beliefs.

When Dr. Jim Bankston was here a few weeks ago dialoging with me he said that as he has gotten older he finds himself believing less but what he does believe believing more profoundly, more deeply. I agree with that.

One of the things I have come to believe more and more deeply is that we must reintroduce the mythic back into our lives. I don't mean that we should simply know it or know about it. That would be like merely looking at a piece of music.

One of the ways we can catch a vision of the transformed world Jesus had in mind is through stories. They helped transform the lives of those who heard Jesus tell them. Even now, though we've heard them hundreds of times, we are hooked within the first few words - "A certain man had two sons. . . ."

Further, when the early community shared with others the experience of their time with Jesus, they told stories about him. “Hey, do you remember that day when Matthew was sitting at the tax collector’s box and this guy named Jesus walked by and said, ‘Matthew, come follow me.’ And Matthew got up and did just that.”

“Not only that,” says another, “I remember when the religious leaders castigated Jesus for hanging out with that sort of person and Jesus said, ‘These are my kind of people. I didn’t come to call the righteous, but sinners. Go learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”

The fact that that exchange involving Matthew doesn’t sound much more to us than some tidbit you might hear at a nearby lunch table is because we aren’t as knowledgeable about family ties and the belonging system of that time. It is a really shocking story.

It is so easy, at least it is for me, in our world and ways of comfort an ease to lose sight of the fact that our world and ways are so contradictory to the way of living and seeing that Jesus taught.

Over and over in both Hebrew Scripture and the Christian Testament we hear of the struggle between the ways of this world and the liberating, loving desire of Sacred Mystery. I don’t know about you but my work with my own spiritual

director shows me to be constantly in need of heaving ears that hear the Sacred Mystery calling me back into the heart of the True Self and away from the ego. As I was reminded in my most recent session of Thomas Merton's admonition, "Remember you are a spiritual being having a human experience."

As we get into the parable of the "man who had two sons," remember that the call to life, love and justice in this story is a call into life in the Spirit, not a call into a religion. This stories, and the Gospel of John when we get to it, are not calling us to be religious. We are being called to be faithful to our true identity.

Religions are necessary, but they are also so risky. Historically religions have been the enemy of truth and of the Sacred. The prophets didn't go around complimenting the religious leaders of their day. Nor did Jesus.

Religions are necessary because they are one way we can have a container for the rituals that lead to transformation. But religions are risky because they tempt us to become righteous and to think we have the answer. If our spiritual work, if it is effective, will lead us to experience not that we have the answer but, rather, that "the answer" has us. Truth wants to reform us not us shape it.

Here is a story - this is about the power of stories, remember: God and Satan were walking down the street one day having a friendly chat. The Lord God Almighty bent down and picked

something up. She gazed as it glowing radiantly in her hand. Satan, curious, asked, “What’s that?” “This,” answered the Lord is TRUTH.” “Here,” replied Satan as it reached for it, “Let me have that - I’ll organize it for you.”

So we organize. In seminaries they have year long courses taught on many levels called “systematic theology.” Our job is not to organize but to be organized, ordered, our life and our world, after the image and teachings of Jesus. Our job is to hear and to respond to the story. And, likely, to become “holy fools” in the process.

This that we do in here is not about religion. I hope you learn some wise and useful religious things. But this in here is about a relationship. It is not about knowing. It is about being known. It is not about finding. It is about being found. Teachings on the path of paradox and contradiction are not about making God visible to us. It is about making us visible to God. We’re not trying to see God in a new way. We’re trying to see ourselves and our world in a new way. This is not about something you do in order to have a spiritual relationship. This is about how a spiritual relationship results when we open our eyes to see the world like God sees, when we learn to open our arms to embrace those whom God embraces.

I want to tell you. It is not a true story, it not factually true. It is truer than true. Listen beyond the facts to the truth it contains.

A young boy's parents were killed in a car wreck. After the funeral a man was driving the boy, and his things, to live with the boy's aunt. He had never met her and was asking the man driving the car what she was like.

"Is she mean or is she kind?"

"Kind."

"Will I have my own room?"

"I'll bet it's already made up."

"Wonder if she'll let me have a dog?"

"I'll bet she will."

They were both starved by the time they got there. When they arrived, it was late. There she was out on the front porch waiting for them. The light was on. "Supper's ready. I've been waiting for you."

Years later, long after he'd grown and gone, he got a letter from her. They had stayed in constant contact. This letter, though, was specific about her aging, about her terminal illness, about her imminent death, and about her fear of what was to become of her.

He wrote her back, “I know exactly what you are going through. I remember when I was coming to live with you. I was so scared. What would become of me? Don’t worry. I know exactly how it will be. Someone will be waiting up for you with the light on to hug you tight and say, “Supper’s ready. I’ve been expecting you.”

Can you hear?

The Sacred is calling us from darkness into light, from bondage into freedom, from death into life - all in the here-and-now.

As we go forward there is an opportunity for us to hear some perspectives, principles, and practices we can use to enhance our experience of life. Following these perspectives, principles, and practices will make you excited, depressed, angry, afraid, joyous, hopeful, and, ultimately, more free and loving.

As you’ll hear, Jesus and his followers used the power of stories to accomplish this.

Can you hear?

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.