

Year A 15<sup>th</sup> Sun OT

Spiritually Teasing Stories Matthew 13:1-23

Like his contemporaries raised in an oral culture—the literacy rate was about 2% in his time—Jesus spoke and taught in stories. All the ancients did this because stories were so effective. They had so many levels of meaning that you couldn't canonize only one, and that made them challenging, diverse, and rich. Moreover, the stories had hidden hooks in them, messages that might only become apparent after you thought about them for a long time. Then it would hit you. Stories also, by nature, expand and evolve over time so that they are able to stimulate the moral imaginations of future generations.

There are the quick throwaway ones like the couple who came upon a well. The wife said, "Let's make a wish." So she made a wish, bent over the well, and tossed in a coin. The husband said, "Why not?" So he also made a wish, but as he bent over to toss in his coin, he bent too far and fell down the well and drowned. His wife said, "Hey, it works!"

We laugh, but even this surface joke has deep roots in the age-old battle of the sexes and the tensions of life's most intimate association.

But let's go deeper as I share other stories with you. On the surface they appear to be entertaining, **but in hindsight, they confront us. They make us think morally.**

The dour, sardonic Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, gave us this to chew on: "I went to a church with a marble floor and sat on the velvet pew. I watched as the sun came shining through the stained-glass windows. The minister, dressed in an elegant robe, opened the golden gilded Bible, marked it with a silk bookmark, and proceeded to proclaim, 'If any man will be my disciple, said Jesus, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.' And I looked around, and nobody was laughing."

The silence tells me that, like a swig of *limoncello* (an Italian lemon liqueur),

it will hit you later, when you might think of the distance of the often-elegant trappings of religion and the one who had nowhere to lay his head.

The priest received a phone call from a very irate father who told him in no uncertain terms, "I hold you personally responsible for this!" He was angry because his newly graduated daughter had decided, in his words, "to throw it all away and go do mission work in Haiti with the Jesuit volunteers. Isn't that absurd!" he went on, "She has a Master's in Business Science degree from Scranton and she's going off to dig ditches in Haiti! I hold you responsible for this!"

"Why me?" asked the priest.

The father said, "You filled her mind with all this religious stuff."

The priest was not intimidated and shot back, "Sir, weren't you the one who had her baptized?"

"Well, yes," said the father, "but what does that have to do with anything?"

"And didn't you send her to CCD classes when she was a little girl?"

"Well, yes."

"And didn't you allow your daughter to go on those trips to Appalachia when she was in high school?"

"Well, yes. I thought it would look good on her resume. Again, what does that have to do with anything?"

"Sir," said the priest, "You're the reason she's throwing it all away. You introduced her to Jesus, not me."

"But," protested the father, "all we wanted was for her to be raised Catholic."

"Well, sorry, sir, but you messed up. You've gone and made a disciple."

**"Yeah, but..."**

**And that, "Yeah, but..." exposes our shallowness, doesn't it? We want to be resume Christians but not serious ones.**

**This man writes:** "I've read a great deal over the years about the unhappy Franz Kafka but never read anything by him. His life and his weird, surreal stories seem to be surrounded and impregnated by so much gloom that I had no desire to risk being pulled into that world. Nevertheless, there must have been something special about a man who could do what he did in the final months of his life when

he was dying of tuberculosis.

"Kafka met a child on the street, crying because she had lost her doll. He explained to her that, while the doll had indeed gone away, he, by a happy coincidence, had just met it and that the doll had promised to write. In the weeks that followed, Kafka did, indeed, write letters to the little girl in which the doll told about its travels and presumably brought sweet magic into that child's life. Who would have suspected this of that miserable man?

And the story perhaps probes our quickness to pass judgments.

**A Jewish delight. You'll enjoy this:** Wonderful smells wafted up and down Roosevelt Road and the New South Loop. People flocked to Brodsky's Better Bagel Bakery and carried away dozens of fresh bagels—everyone, that is, except Sam. Every day, Sam came just to smell the bagels. He stood on the sidewalk sniffing the air with a smile on his face. This made Brodsky crazy.

"Sam, why don't you buy something?! You're just taking space away from my customers!"

"I'm on a small pension and can't afford to buy. The onion, poppy seed, and garlic smells remind me of my childhood days in Brooklyn."

Some of the people waiting took sides. "Leave him alone, Brodsky, you bully!"

"Yeah. Brodsky, he's not taking up much room,"

Others disagreed. "You know, Brodsky, he's stealing the smells of your bagels! Take him to TV court, Judge Jackson's Jiffy Justice."

"Yah, I've seen that dude. He's a hoot!"

The next Thursday, Brodsky took Sam to TV court. The bailiff ordered everyone to stand. A tall, stern looking man in a dark robe entered and banged his gavel. "Be seated. I am Judge Jackson and I dispense Jiffy Justice. Let's get started. Mr. Brodsky, what is your complaint?"

"Well, your honor," he said, pointing to Sam, "this man stands in front of my bakery taking up space, and he steals the smell of my fresh bagels. He never buys anything!" I'd like full compensation for the smells he steals."

"I see. What do you have to say, Sam?"

"Well, Judge, I do come for the wonderful smells and the fond memories of my childhood. I cant afford to buy."

"Thank you both," said the judge. "I'll be back with my decision in a jiffy." And so he was: "This was a difficult case to decide quickly. However, I rule in favor of Brodsky."

Grumbles were heard throughout the courtroom. The judge banged his gavel. "Sam, do you have money with you?"

"Yes, I have a few coins in my pocket."

"Will you shake them, please?" Sam did as he was told.

"Mr. Brodsky, did you hear those coins?"

"Yes, I did, now when do I get paid?"

The judge smiled, "Mr. Brodsky, you've been fully compensated. The sound of Sam's coins just paid for the smells of your bagels." Now that's jiffy justice.

**Don't be deceived. Let the story sink further into your hearts as you consider personal issues of small-mindedness, pettiness, narrowness of outlook. See if the story can inflate your hearts to larger issues of grace.**

Finally, this one. A man was being tailgated by a stressed-out woman on a busy boulevard. Suddenly the light turned yellow just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating thorough the intersection. The tailgating woman was furious, and she honked her horn angrily, screaming in frustration and shouting obscenities as she fumbled with her cell phone. She was still in mid-rant when she heard a tap on her window and looked up to see a stern police officer. He ordered her out of the car with her hands up and took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours she was escorted by a very embarrassed arresting officer back to the desk and given her personal effects. The officer said, "I'm really very sorry. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn and cursing a blue streak at the guy in front of you. Then I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do?' bumper sticker, the 'Choose Life' license plate holder, the 'Follow Me to

Sunday School' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. **Well, naturally," he continued, "I assumed you had stolen the car."**