

Which One Washes His Face?

Irish author and theologian Peter Rollins (whose book title is the title of this sermon) shares the story of a young man who is in search a religious leader who is willing to guide him in his quest for knowledge and certainty.¹

After a prolonged search the young man finally finds a suitable rabbi and asks if the rabbi would be willing to tutor him. But upon seeing this youth the rabbi simply smiles and says "You are too young and have too little life experience for the lessons I have to teach. Come back to me in ten years".

But the young man is full of a confidence that borders on arrogance and so responds, "I may be young but I have already mastered Aristotelian logic and symbolic logic. Test me. Ask me any question you want and I will prove to you that I am ready."

The rabbi thinks for a few moments and then chooses a question: "Two men descend a chimney. When they get to the bottom, one man's face is covered in soot. Tell me, which one washes his face?"

In response the young man immediately says, "Why, that is easy. It would be the one with the soot on his face".

In response the rabbi turns to leave saying, "Of course not. What are you thinking? It is the man without the soot who washes his face, for he sees his friend's complexion and thinks that he too must be dirty".

"Please don't send me away" replies the young man. "Test me again. Any question at all".

And so the rabbi thinks for a moment and then says "OK, listen carefully this time. Two men descend a chimney. When they get to the bottom, one man's face is covered in soot. Tell me, which one washes his face?"

"Why the man without the soot on his face," replies the young man.

Again the rabbi shakes his head, "You are not listening in the right way. It is obvious that it is the man with the soot on his face who washes. He sees the reaction of his friend upon reaching the ground, can taste the soot from his lips, and can feel it stinging his eyes. Now leave me in peace"

"Please", replies the young man, "test me one last time, as I think I have it now".

"One last time" replies the rabbi. "This time I want you to really listen. Two men descend a chimney. When they get to the bottom, one man's face is covered in soot. Tell me, which one washes his face?"

"The first answer I gave" shouts the young man, "but for different reasons".

¹ Peter Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, 2008 (<http://peterrollins.net/category/blog/parables/>).

"No, no, no" says the rabbi and he leaves. "They both wash their faces. How could someone descend a chimney and not think that their face would be covered in soot?"

Provocative Parables Provoke

Rollins tells this story as a parable of faith. The purpose of faith is not to arrive at certainty, but to disturb what we think we know already. He writes, "...faith involves an ongoing transformative dialogue, instead of...some static understanding of God and the world..."²

This is why Jesus taught in parables. The object of a parable is to disturb truth as much as it is to uncover it. They help us go deeper into our understanding of God and ourselves by pushing our buttons in some way or another. Parables are meant to provoke. Much like the rabbi in our story, they frustrate us.

Rollins writes, "Our religious world is awash with a vast sea of writing and talks designed to make the truth of faith clear, concise and palatable...parables subvert this desire to make faith simple and understandable. They do not offer the reader clarity, for they refuse to be captured in the net of single interpretation and instead demand our eternal return to their words, our wrestling with them, and our puzzling over them."³

Entering into the Questions

Another way to say it is that parables are more about our heart than our head. As such, the way to approach a parable is not intellectually but experientially. We must use our imaginations and enter into it in order to uncover what treasures it might have in store for us this time around.

A great way to enter into the parable is through our questions. What questions does it raise for you? What questions do you have of it?

As we ask questions of the text it draws us in deeper into dialogue with it. As we search for answers, we realize that the ground beneath our feet is not as firm as we first thought. Like the young seeker dialoging with the rabbi, our assumptions and perspective begin to face challenges. Before we know it, we realize the positions have switched. In our questioning of the text we discover that it is asking questions of us as well.

Are We Reading Back to Forward?

Today's parable is no exception. It raises many questions and poses quite a few of its own challenges for us to consider.

One of my main questions is more of the way we read the parable than then a question of the parable itself. I wonder if we don't have a tendency to read the parable from back to front. I question whether we re-interpret the beginning in light of the end. After all, the end is rather striking and strong.

² Ibid.

³ Peter Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic*, (Paraclete Press, 2009) p. x-xi.

I say this because it sure seems like we assume that the third slave's characterization of the master is basically accurate. He says that the master is a harsh and cruel man, so we assume that he is. But what evidence do we actually have of that within the parable?

For the Love of Money

This master places an enormous amount of trust in these three slaves. To one he gives five talents, another two and the last just one.

Talent, in this context, does not actually refer to our innate gifts or abilities, but to a very large sum of money. A talent is actually a unit of measurement for currency, equal to the value of 80 pounds of silver or roughly 6,000 times the normal daily wage. In today's money, we are talking roughly a half a million dollars!⁴

Here we might wonder how the master came to be in possession of such wealth. A case could be made that no one can become that rich without stealing from or exploiting others. Clearly there is a system in place that makes some master and others slaves in the parable. This system is reinforced at the end of the parable where the master takes from those who have little and give it to those who have more.

Obviously there are themes of oppression and economic justice to be raised. Read this way, the parable challenges us to wonder about the role we play within our own economic system.

As Scottish theologian Richard Holloway points out, "Everyone who is successful in life is complicit in the way the world works, the way of institutional power, the way that creates expendable people who may be sacrificed for the sake of the larger group."⁵

So perhaps this parable is asking us to examine the role we play in the systems around us. Are we standing for justice? Are we willing to examine how we might be complicit in economic injustice?

You Mean God Isn't An Old White Dude?

That is certainly a provocative way to read this parable. A further challenge it offers us is to see the divine presence not in the position of the master, but as the third slave. This upsets our expectation of where we find God. We almost automatically assume God will be represented by the most powerful or important character in the parable. To suggest the third slave is the hero, perhaps even the Christ figure in the parable, challenges us to examine the ways our expectations of where we find God might limit the ways we actually find God.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable_of_the_talents_or_minas.

⁵ Richard Holloway, *Doubts and Loves: What is Left of Christianity*, (Canongate: 2001) , p. 169.

Back to the Beginning Again

Still, I still want to push us even further yet. Because I think this parable offers an even further challenge to the way we think about and talk about God.

Let us consider the master once again. This time, for argument sake, let's give him the benefit of the doubt. After all, by entrusting such a large sum of money to these three slaves, he is showing a generous amount of trust.

And what happens? The first two have been bold in their investment. They didn't squander their master's generosity and trust, but took a cue from it. Their investments were rewarded and when the master returns he doesn't merely grab up what is his and send his slaves packing. He entrusts them with even more. Even more than that, he invites them to share in his joy with him.

Does that sound like a cruel task master? Does that sound like someone who views others as expendable?

If our parable ended there, we could all go home happy. But of course it doesn't. We still have to hear from the last slave. To this point, I would remind us, the master seems generous and joyous. But things are about to change quickly.

Now we don't know if all three we present to hear the amount of the other's trust funds from the master. Maybe they were and the third slave overheard how much the others were getting. Maybe he was bitter he received so little, in comparison, although the amount he received was still quite impressive. Maybe he has some other reason to take this act of generosity and trust and turn it into an occasion for fear, but his opinion of the master is clear. He clearly believes he is a harsh man, not to be trifled with. So he buries his treasure to keep it safe until the master returns so that he can safely return what belongs to him and avoid any punishment that might be in store for those who squander his wealth.

Of course, the twist in the parable is that this choice, this course of action leads him right to where he didn't want to go: his master's bad side.

Tom Long explains: "The tragic news of this parable is that this one talent man pronounces his own judgment; he gets the only master his tiny and warped vision can see...[And so the story then] is not about a generous master suddenly turning cruel and punitive; [rather] it is about living with the consequences of one's own faith. If one trusts the goodness of God, one can boldly venture out with eyes wide open to the grace of life and can discover the joy of God's providence everywhere. But to be a child of the generous, gracious, and life living God and, nonetheless, to insist upon viewing God as oppressive, cruel, and fear provoking is to live a life that is tragically impoverished."⁶

⁶ Tom Long, *Matthew* (Westminster John Knox: 1997) p. 283.

The Bridge between Belief and Action

Do we believe God generous and joyous or cruel and harsh? That is the question put before us by this parable. The further challenge is that the quality of our action depends largely on the way we choose to answer that question. This is reflected in the Karen Armstrong quote I put in the middle of the bulletin for today. "If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express sympathy in concrete acts of loving-kindness, this was good theology. But if your notion of God made you unkind, belligerent, cruel, of self-righteous, or if it led you to kill in God's name, it was bad theology."⁷

The reverse can be said to be true as well. Our action reveals the type of God we believe in. The action of the first two slaves revealed a generous master, while the third believed his master to be cruel and so acted accordingly.

The Age Old Argument

Of course, Jesus or Matthew could have answered the question for us by having one of the first two slaves lose part of all of their trust fund and then show us the master's reaction. Would he still have been affirming of their boldness or would he have thrown them in the outer darkness for not returning the investment with interest?

But they don't do that for us and for good reason.

Rollins tells another story of two rabbis arguing over a piece of scripture⁸. These two rabbis took very different meanings from the text. They argued and argued. For years. Decades even. Finally, their arguing became tiresome even to God. So God appeared to them and said, "You two have been arguing over this passage of scripture so long. I can't take it anymore. I am going to tell you exactly what it means and be done with it."

And, miraculously, for the first time in decades, the two rabbis agreed on something. They looked at each other and in unison said to God, "No. No. Don't you dare!"

The point is that if the argument is resolved, the rabbis' relationship to the text and each other would be lost. Wrestling with each other and the text was far more valuable and meaningful than resolving the tension and finding out which one is right.

How (Not) To Speak of God

Ironically, many think of Christianity as a way to resolve the argument, to end the discussion, to attain certainty. Nothing could be further from the truth. Why else would Jesus teach in parables?

Richard Holloway writes, "Christianity isn't meant to explain the world; it is meant to disturb it."⁹ Or as Rollins reminds us, it is about that ongoing dialogue, not a static picture of God.

⁷ http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2637.Karen_Armstrong.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8UpU7H-2f8>.

⁹ Holloway, 134.

We engage in this dialogue with scripture. We are frustrated and disturbed by passages like today's parables. We question them and they question us. We engage it with each other as well. We argue with one another over how to interpret them and apply them to our lives. And in it all, we are challenged to dialogue with God, to try to name to unnamable, to call on the one who is beyond our understanding. This is the task of faith, to chase after that which can never be pinned down. It is not a matter of the head, but the heart. Not an intellectual exercise, but an experiential one.

It's hard to put into words. Words are so fragile anyway. They are far too limiting. We should be careful in using them to describe our experience of God and the divine. They are as likely to mislead as they are to enlighten.

The god that can be named isn't God. Yet, we must try. We must speak of God and not speak of God. We must continue the dialogue with scripture and each other, knowing that the God we cannot name shapes the quality of our actions and the quality of our actions speaks more about the God we believe in than our words ever could.