

Your RISUS PASCHALIS, or Easter joke. A man goes to see a Rabbi. "Rabbi, something terrible is happening and I have to talk to you about it." The Rabbi asks, "What's wrong?" The man replies, "My wife is going to poison me." The Rabbi, very surprised by this, asks, "How can that be?" The man then pleads, "I'm telling you, I'm certain she's going to poison me. What should I do?" The Rabbi then offers, "Tell you what. Let me talk to her, I'll see what I can find out and I'll let you know." A week later the Rabbi calls the man and says, "I spoke to your wife on the phone for three hours. You want my advice?" The man says, "Yes." And the Rabbi says, "Take the poison."

Some of you may have noticed that I added the 5 previous verses of this gospel text from what is actually assigned in the lectionary. These initial verses give us a critical context for the passage we just heard. In 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish culture one of the expectations of the coming Messiah was that he would rebuild or restore the Temple. King David had planned the Temple and his son, King Solomon, had built it. But over the years the Temple had to be physically rebuilt and spiritually restored. The festival of the Dedication, what we know as Hanukkah, recalled a physical and spiritual restoration of the Temple. So the setting is significant. On a feast that celebrates the physical and spiritual restoration of the Temple, a new spiritual restoration is under way. This restoration is a complete rebuilding, a new foundation that replaces the original work of Solomon. Therefore, it is winter for the building itself and for the type of worship it conducts, the end of its centrality and activity. But that does not mean that God's presence has abandoned the earth. The new Temple, Jesus, is walking in the old Temple – in the portico of Solomon, on the feast of spiritual renewal, in the dying days of the edifice. The replacement has arrived.

However, this is not the first time Jesus has visited the Temple. Earlier in John's Gospel He arrived with a whip of cords, overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and set the animals free (Jn 2:13-22). When 'the Jews' asked Him for a sign to legitimate His disruption of Temple sacrifice, Jesus told them, "Destroy this temple and in 3 days I will raise it up." They thought He was talking about the physical edifice of the Temple. But the narrator informs his readers that Jesus was referring to His body. Jesus was not only spiritually restoring the Temple; He was spiritually replacing it.

But they reject Him, and Jesus says that only His sheep hear His voice. To hear Jesus' voice means more than attending to the words He speaks. It entails discerning who the speaker truly is. Jesus' speech is filled with invitations to make a leap of faith into His fullest and deepest identity: "The Father and I are one." When His sheep hear His voice, they have shared in His divine consciousness. This sharing entailed knowing themselves as Jesus knew them. Believing in Jesus' name, they began to believe in their own. "But to all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." (Jn 1:12-13) Knowing who JESUS is, contains the reciprocal knowledge of knowing WE are a child of God, and that our truest identity and Jesus' identity are eternally intertwined. Naturally these sheep follow Jesus and grow more fully into who they are. "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when He is revealed, we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He is." (1 Jn 3:2). The simultaneous revelation of who Jesus is and who we are will continue in ways we do not yet understand.

The sheep who hear Jesus' voice also receive eternal life from Him. This means that death cannot destroy us and that 'wolves,' those who want to do us harm, cannot snatch us out of Jesus' hand (Jn 10:12). The ultimate reason for this is that the Father has given Jesus an eternal life that is stronger than all else. To

be held by Jesus' hand is to be held by the hand of the Father. (adapted from John Shea, THE RELENTLESS WIDOW, p. 129-132)

OK, so what? How do we come to an understanding – our TRUE understanding – that we are God's children and that we are forever united with the Shepherd, the Christ. We grew up learning a language of faith – for better or worse. Parents and teachers – pastors and preachers have attempted to give us their best understanding of this great mystery of God. And what we have received as faith, we have to appropriate into our lives. We need to LIVE out a faith. A real faith that struggles with real understanding – and it needs a real voice. Which brings me to my second point. Authentic religion.

Someone asked the Master why he seemed so wary of religion. Wasn't religion the finest thing humanity possessed? The Master's reply was enigmatic: "The best and the worst – that's what you get from religion." "Why the worst?" "Because people mostly pick up enough religion to hate but not enough to love." (AWAKENING, Anthony de Mello, p. 310) The problem is that God wants spiritual fruit – but He ends up with a lot of religious nuts! (PREACHING WELL, Vol III, #2, p.4)

TRUE religion never adds pain where pain already overflows. Think of this in terms of the way we have spoken about transgender persons, gay people, people who disagree with us -- anyone who is different from us. When we are truly religious – when we HEAR the voice of the Shepherd -- we know that we have to make room – in our hearts and in our churches for everyone. Because everyone belongs to the flock that Christ calls. No exceptions. We do not want to – supposedly in the name of Christ?! – to add further pain to a hurting person's life. True religion is a gleaning of understanding, forgiveness, graciousness, and comfort. We begin to see others as God sees them – as His creation, His handiwork, His beloved ones. And then we begin to see them in such a way as God will see all of us on Judgment Day.

Healthy religion always enlightens the mind and broadens our vision – it changes our hearts for the better. It allows us to have more room in our hearts – for every lost, last and least person we encounter. A truly religious heart is courageous, but also prudent. Truth is spoken in love and never as a bludgeon. It is invitational rather than confrontational. It is genuinely loving. Unhealthy religion darkens the mind, narrows the vision, hardens the heart, operates out of fear, and becomes selfish and hateful in general, at least toward people with a different understanding than their own. (adapted freely from James L. Philpott, in LECTINARY HOMILETICS, Oct 1994, vol V, #11, p. 32)

Joseph Campbell once asked, "When disaster strikes, what is it that supports you and carries you through?...That is the test of myth, the building myth of your life." Now we need to understand the word 'myth' as he is using it. Myth is not something that is not true, not something that is made up. Rather, myth as these writers are using it means something that is DEEPLY true – foundationally true. True in our inner core. Some writers of religion speak of the 'founding myth,' or 'underlying myth,' that defines our life. That is our religion – whether we explicitly use the language of religion or not. For us as Catholic Christians, our founding myth is the Paschal Mystery of Jesus – the dying and rising of Christ that gives us the template, the understanding of how we are to go through life. Because of Jesus Christ, we understand that our little dyings that are a part of growing and maturing each day – are all preparation for us to offer the last breath of our lives with the same words as Jesus offered His: "into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit." We want to leave this world with a graceful and serene surrender, not a snarl of hatred, bitterness, or regret.

And in the end, no matter what religion we have professed – or not – we will be judged by how we have loved. As St. John of the Cross put it: "In the evening of life, we will be judged on love." We will know if we have heeded the voice of the Shepherd if we have learned to love with a God-sized heart. A story to

conclude. Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn tells this story. Once upon a time there was a magic ring that gave its wearer the gifts of grace, kindness, and generosity. When the owner of the ring was on his deathbed, each of his 3 sons came in one at a time and asked for the ring. In reply, the old man promised the ring to each of them. Before he died, he sent for the finest jeweler and paid him to make 2 rings that were identical to the original one. The jeweler did that, and before he died, the man gave each son one of the rings without telling him about the other two. After a while, the 3 sons discovered that each of them had been given a ring. So they went before a local judge to help them decide who had the magic ring. The judge carefully scrutinized each ring but could not tell them apart. The judge declared, "We shall know who has the magic ring when we observe the direction your life takes." Each of the brothers then acted as if he had the magic ring by being kind, honest, thoughtful, and generous. Mendelssohn concluded, "Religions are like the 3 brothers in the story. The moment their members cease striving for justice and love we will know that their religion is not the one God gave to the world." (Phillip Gulley & James Mulholland, IF GOD IS LOVE: REDISCOVERING GRACE IN AN UNGRACIOUS WORLD, p. 139-140) Let the Church say Amen.