

Proper 25 October 23, 2022
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Amazing Lessons in a Parable
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

A good friend and colleague recently took his family – himself, his wife, their son, daughter-in-law and their two grandsons, both under the age of 10 - to a corn maze for a fun afternoon outing. For those of you who are not familiar with corn mazes, they are huge walking path puzzles cut into a farmer's corn field. Corn mazes vary in size, the one my friend took his family to is bigger than a football field. No matter the size, they are designed to get lost in and to find your way out of. Some, like the one my friend visited, have stations in the maze to help people find their way. This particular maze gave out maps at the beginning and had mailboxes strategically placed inside with additional maps to guide people through the whole maze.

My friend is well aware one of his stronger personality traits is he can be very competitive. He is also incredibly generous, encouraging, kind, and inclusive, but sometimes his competitive nature gets the better of him; like it did that afternoon with his family. My friend, whose name is Scott, thought he could expertly lead his family through the entire corn maze. So, into the maze they all went, confident he could lead them to the first mailbox in a matter of a few minutes.

However, that isn't what happened. It wasn't long before Scott realized he had no idea where he was or where the mailbox they were looking for was. He was lost. On top of that, his family had gotten separated, and one of his grandsons became anxious he would never see his little brother again.

Fortunately for Scott and his family and friends, he has a good sense of humor and can laugh at himself, especially in moments like this. His sense of humor helped him realize the maze was not as easy to navigate as he thought. And it helped him do the right thing: he stopped, gathered his family together, asked for help, and let others take over the role of navigating. This changed everything. By asking for help, Scott learned there was a tower they could climb and look out over the whole maze to gain perspective. He also learned that if they stopped and listened, they could hear the sounds from a nearby road, which was south of the maze, to help orient themselves. All of this helped Scott and his family traverse the maze together. They did not reach every mailbox, like Scott had planned, but they did have a lot of fun. And they got out of the corn maze together. No one – especially no one's little brother- was lost or left behind.

Scott's wife said she realized it didn't matter if they found all the mailboxes because they were all together on a beautiful fall day, laughing, and having fun. A day like that might never happen again, and they made a good and joyful memory they can share for years to come.

This family outing could have gone much differently if Scott was not a humble person who, despite his strong drive to win, can laugh at himself when things don't work out, knows to regroup, step back, gain perspective, listen, and let others participate. Scott learned a long time ago; it isn't all about him.

You don't have to be lost in a corn maze to appreciate how Scott's experience resonates with the parable Jesus told in today's Gospel about two characters and their very different prayers. It's important to remember that unlike my friend, the characters in Jesus' parable are completely fictional, made up by Jesus for the purpose of bringing out the lessons in the parable.

Something to notice is how different the two characters' prayers are. Both are serious prayers, but I wonder if the story itself would have made people chuckle when they first heard it, because there is quite a bit of exaggeration going on. The pharisee boasts his practices of piety are above and beyond the expectation. His prayer is all about himself. What he couched as gratitude sounds more like bragging. He goes a step farther to lift himself by putting down others, including the other character in the parable.

It seems at the heart of his parable Jesus planted the lesson that if the only way a person can lift themselves up is by putting others down, then they failed to recognize or acknowledge the humanity of another. They trust their own judgement instead of trusting in the love of God by putting themselves in the place of God. This is the opposite of the virtue of being humble; we call it arrogance and it is one of the main causes of the many divisions in the world and in our lives today.

The other character in the parable, the tax collector, is also an exaggeration; he has to be in order to contrast with the extreme prayer of the pharisee. Instead of lifting himself up, the tax collector beats his chest – an action some still use in worship as a sign of guilt – and asks God for mercy, for forgiveness.

So, in this parable we have two characters: one lifts himself up by putting others down. The other puts himself down by confessing his sin and asking for mercy. When Jesus says it is the later who was justified, meaning God granted

him forgiveness, we can forget this is a parable and these are not real characters, and mistake the lesson Jesus was teaching is to behave like the tax collector, beating our chest when we confess our sins in church only to go back into the world with no intention of changing or trying not to sin. But I am not sure that is what Jesus was getting at in this parable.

I wonder if Jesus was less concerned about how to pray in public and was trying to teach about how to live as one of his followers. Life and the people in it are a lot more complicated than a parable and its exaggerated characters. There are lots of twists and turns in life, many of them unexpected, like trying to navigate a corn maze. Sometimes, without meaning to, we can get lost. Take a wrong turn. Get separated from the ones we love. Other times, we might stumble upon something wonderful, like people who can help, or learn how to work together instead of competing against each other, that people can be funny, helpful, and kind. And when we aren't trying to be right or prove someone else wrong, there can be more opportunities for joy in life than we thought.

Getting through life with this kind of humility starts when we realize God is God and we aren't. This doesn't mean we don't hold ourselves or each other accountable for harm or wrongs done to each other, but it does mean recognizing how each of us makes mistakes, has flaws, and when we learn to laugh at ourselves, to not take ourselves too seriously, to practice gentleness and compassion with ourselves and others, to forgive and change, we can learn and grow.

Another lesson the parable and corn maze have in common is the value of perspective. Sometimes we need to step back to get a wider picture, to remember nothing is isolated, and whether we like it or not, we are all connected to each other and to God. Like my friend Scott when he could see the whole maze, Jesus showed us two very different characters in the parable to help show a wider perspective of people and their prayers. Prayer isn't always about getting the words or the actions right; it is remembering God is always listening and always present to all of us. One of the many gifts God gave us is each other – not to compete against and not to create systems that pit us against each other economically, politically, racially, but to value, love, and care for each other.

Of course, following Jesus in life is much more complicated than his parable. That is one reason why Jesus gives us parables and lessons to help us. And when we listen for Holy Spirit that is Christ with us – like my friend learned to listen to the sounds of the road when he was lost in the corn maze, it can help us

orient ourselves through the maze of life, even when feel lost, confused, frustrated, or tired. So that when those unexpected moments happen where our certainty melts away, instead of fighting each other or blaming each other, we can remember to turn to God and each other to help each other find our way through. In so doing, we may discover, like Scott and his family, more joy than we imagined.