

Homily given by the Reverend Doctor James R. McLean Jr. at St. Christopher's on Sunday, September 16, 2018:

The Christian Bible has within it an amazing variety of offerings. I'll bet you know that but perhaps have never considered it. But, indeed it does.

How about tales of murder? How about Cain and Abel?

Is there sex and lust in the Bible? King David sends Uriah the Hittite into the thick of battle so he'll be killed and then have his wife. That qualifies.

And by contrast, what about music? The Bible has its own Hymnal, the Book of Psalms.

What about suspense? The Hebrews escaping the Egyptian army as the waters were parted is pretty suspenseful.

And then there are teachings such as the parables.

Not to mention history, as in the Books of Kings and Chronicles.

You can probably think of others; but I bring to your attention one you haven't thought about. The Bible has plenty in this category, and that would be PARADOX. And some of the most famous paradoxes in the world are found in Holy Scripture. Everything in the Bible is a window, and if you look through it you'll get a glimpse of who God is, what the truth is, and who you really are. A paradox can do that and do it brilliantly. Since there is a prime example of a paradox in today's Gospel, let's take a look, and not surprisingly it's from the words of Jesus himself who was a master of the paradox. He says, "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

When a paradox comes to call, it usually looks like it's tripping over logic, like this one. Like, "Lose your life and then you gain it? That makes no sense whatsoever!"

A paradox can be defined this way—a paradox is two things that seem to be contradictory, but aren't. A paradox is two things that appear to be polar opposites but in reality are consistent with one another.

To gain your life, you gotta lose your life. If you lose your life and give it away in service, if you give away your life freely, if you give yourself away in love, if you give yourself away without regard to self, you gain not only your life but *more* of your life. When you speak and share and give away the truth, you create freedom not only for yourself but those around you. This is one of the most famous paradoxes ever uttered. And the reason it's so universally appreciated is because it's true.

There's one place in the New Testament where there are a number of paradoxes placed intentionally together, also from the teachings of Jesus—and those would be the Beatitudes. And I believe they're so much admired because of the paradoxical ring that they have. Let's consider one—from the fourth verse of Mathew's fifth chapter. You've heard it many times: "Blessed are those who mourn." Like all paradoxes it seems to flaunt logic. But when you pry it open, it's grounded in truth. Mourning would never initially appear to be a blessing to anyone. The hardest of all the emotions is said to be grief. From my own experience and I'll bet from yours, mourning and grief are hard to bear. For Jesus to call mourning a blessing could appear almost callous. But as we explore this paradox of Jesus, we find it not to be true, but *very* true. Profound loss always requires a profound mourning. Mourning takes us to the depths of grief. And it guides us in it, through it, and beyond it. Anything that can and would do that can be nothing less than a blessing. Blessed indeed are those who mourn. They shall be comforted greatly.

Paradoxes are found in many places other than the Bible, and when one comes calling, my advice is to pay attention. *Close attention.*

Another paradox comes from the world of American medicine. It goes like this: "In order to be right, you have to be wrong." There it goes again—more flaunting of logic; more contradiction. Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital is where you wanna go if you're sick in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It's a teaching hospital

for Harvard's Medical School. In the year 2008, a surgical patient was wheeled into the recovery room at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital. When she was gradually free of the anesthesia and had regained full consciousness, she asked the medical team something quite unusual. Her question was, "Why are all these bandages on the wrong side of my body?" At a Harvard Teaching Hospital? OOPS! At this hospital, they were well-aware that the eighth most frequent cause of death is medical error. And they knew they were part of a larger American problem. They also knew that saying, "Gosh, we gotta do this better," and sending out a memo wasn't a solution. They made the commitment that medical errors in their hospital would not be made. And in order to achieve that objective, the first AND most important step was to acknowledge that "If you wanna be right, you gotta be wrong. You gotta be serious about being wrong, you gotta be honest about being wrong, you gotta apologize for being wrong. You gotta mean it, and claim it, and own it, and say it." They did it together, they did it publically, and they made lists of where they'd gone wrong. Can you really be right when you haven't been serious about the fact that you were wrong? They said, in a word, "No". If you wanna be right, you've got to be willing to be seriously wrong. And admit it.

The Bible is famous for its paradoxes:

"Many are called but few are chosen."

"The first shall be last and the last shall be first."

Paradoxes are kind of like a religious curve ball—they're surprising, unexpected, and at first blush a little mystifying. But they keep us grounded and a lot more humble.

Someone once asked, "Do we interpret the Bible or does the Bible interpret us?" And as paradoxes go, I think you could ask the exact same thing."

Amen.