

Ash Wednesday, 2009

I had an odd thing happen this afternoon, in my Introduction to Religious Studies class. Have any of you heard of The Pleasantries of the Incredible Mullah Nasrudin? No? Well, it's a collection of short (and I mean less than a page and a half) narratives, stories, sayings and incidents involving a Sufi mullah named Nasrudin. He's a bit of a fool, a bit of a clown. Many sacred ceremonies have a clown. If you go to the great holidays of the Tibetan Buddhists, such as Mani Rimdu, they have a clown. Many of the ceremonies of the southwest Pueblos require the presence of a clown. It's the clown's job to interrupt the sacred with the human, so that we don't get too bound up in how successful we are at being sacred. I think, sometimes, that the removal of slapstick from the life of the Episcopal Church has not benefitted us. It may not be helpful to take our religion more seriously than we take our God.

In these Nasrudin stories he's always puncturing pretentiousness. He does so by being just as pretentious as the other guy, but ending up looking absolutely ridiculous. Because you can see ridiculousness in him, you see it by reflection in the person he's parodying, and, finally, in oneself.

One of my favorites is about the time he's on a journey and meets a priest and a yogi. They decide to travel together, so we have a Sufi Muslim cleric, a Christian, presumably Syriac Orthodox, priest, and a Hindu yogi, all happily walking down the road together. Now remember, this is a Muslim story. While the priest and yogi engage in their devotions, they send the mullah into the town to buy food. So he goes into the town, buys food and comes back with it. Then the question arises, who gets first choice of the portions? The priest, the mullah and the yogi argue about this and can't agree. So they agree to sleep on it, and whoever has the most remarkable dream gets first choice of breakfast. Next morning, the priest says, "Well, I dreamt that I was confronted by the founder of my religion, and there were great choirs of angels singing, and he bent down and recognized me and gave me his special blessing." Then the Yogi says, "I dreamt that I entered Nirvana and became as nothing, enjoying the great all." Then Nasrudin says, "I dreamt that I met Kabir, the founder of my order, and he said, 'Nasrudin, eat the food!' And, of course, I had to obey."

You see, there's a skewering in that story of the pretentiousness of the priest and yogi. Both are using their religion to get the best breakfast, which Nasrudin also does. But Nasrudin is direct, he relates his religious experience directly to the desire for the best breakfast, while the other two hide the connection.

So, after reading about a half dozen of these stories, I asked my students, "What did you hear in these stories? What's happening in them?" They answered that the mullah tricked people and wanted things. I had to pull, fairly hard, to draw out the other perspective: the humor, that in mirroring their behavior and outwitting them the mullah showed them what they were really doing and who they really were. It was hard work. I've been thinking about this for the better part of the afternoon. That in religion, there's a temptation to think that what we do and what happens to us is key. Do I get my blessing? Do I get into Nirvana? I then asked the class what they thought the point to Christianity was, and the first answer I got was, "To get to heaven." In terms of the self, it's the same answer as Nasrudin getting the breakfast.

If the point is *my* getting to heaven, I have a feeling I'll be taking the alternative to Heaven with me. The point can't be me getting to heaven, but has to be that God is love. It may be somewhat dangerous, in the light of that love, to care very much about our own ultimate fate. If the story of Jesus means anything, it means that God, in caring for his creation, was somewhat careless about his own fate. Perhaps the point to Lent is not so much disciplining ourselves to do the right thing as it is letting go of thinking that we're quite all that important. We need some kind of Native American, or Tibetan Buddhist or Sufi clown to bring us down to earth. I'm wondering if that's not the point to Lent. Escaping, a la Nasrudin, from a sense of our own centrality and importance. Coming back down to earth about ourselves.

Another story, about Nasrudin and his wife, illustrates the point nicely. The mullah was always next door to financial disaster. So his wife, because all mullahs need to be married, said to him, "Get a job." He said, "I can't. I'm already working for the all highest." And she said, "Does he pay you?" And Nasrudin said, "Not yet." Then she said, "You'd better ask for your wages, because if he is an honest employer, he will pay you." So Nasrudin goes into his back garden, falls on his knees, and prays to Allah for a bag of 40 gold pieces. A money lender, who lives the next house over, hears this and thinks to play a joke on the mullah. So he tosses a bag of 40 gold pieces out his window. It falls in front of the mullah, who picks it up, goes into the house to his wife and announces, "Allah has payed me."

But when Nasrudin begins to spend this money, the neighbor becomes a bit disturbed, thinking, "I'd better spring the joke and get my money back." So he asks Nasrudin for it, and the mullah says, "What do you mean it's yours? Allah sent it in response to my prayer asking for back wages." The money lender said, "We'll see about this. I'm taking you to court." But Nasrudin responds, "I can't go to court, I don't have anything to wear and I don't have a horse to ride. If I appear before the judge in my present destitution, he will be unfairly influenced by your more affluent condition. So, loan me a cloak and horse." The money lender does, thinking it will make no difference. So, he and Nasrudin go to the judge, who asks Nasrudin what his defense is against the charge of theft. The mullah says, "My neighbor is insane." The judge then asks Nasrudin if he has any evidence of this. Nasrudin replies, "If you ask him about the horse I ride and the cloak I'm wearing, he will tell you they are his." At that point, the money lender interrupted, shouting, "They are mine." And the judge closed the case. OK?

You see, it's a rather witty way of presenting the unexpectedness of life, and how things take strange turns and how one needs to mean what one does and how we are not gods to play with other's lives. I think Lent ought not to focus so much on being good or bad, or successful at virtue or at self-denial. Lent is more about getting ourselves back into perspective, with being willing to accept the strangeness of what goes on around us, with seeking God in the unexpected and not only in the box we've already made to contain him. So, in some ways, perhaps a Muslim mullah is a good introduction to Christian Lent. At least Lent the way I'd like to consider and practice it. Nasrudin himself would have appreciated the irony.

Lent isn't about becoming good. It's about deepening a relation. You don't deepen a relation without taking risks. *This is true with God, too.* In order to deepen a relation with him one must risk being wrong. I've made plenty of theological mistakes, and, what's more important, mistakes in understanding other people's beliefs. And, even more important, mistakes in

assessing and responding to pastoral situations. But none of these mistakes, even sins, is terribly important as long as the conversation continues. As long as our errors are not the center of our universe, we can be healed. The things that are deadly are those which encourage us to stop listening. "I know the answer to that." (The quiz show model of religion. The more right answers you know, the more chance of getting into heaven.) These sorts of things discourage risk and exploration. Once in proportion, we realize we aren't so important, so central, that we can't afford to risk in our relation with God. If we were so essential that God wouldn't love us or would abandon us, depending on whether we made a success or a hash of our relation with him, then maybe our virtue would be important. But he's not going to do that. He's not going to allow our egocentricity to determine his response to us. So relax. Read some stories about Sufi mullahs, laugh at yourselves in laughing at him, and get things back in proportion.

Maybe a Lent which focuses on small things rather than big things? Maybe looking at small things is a good discipline? Maybe recovering humanity in the small things rather than seeking sweeping virtues is a good foundation for Lent.

That's enough ascetical theology. Now, something personal. Lent is not my favorite season of the church's year. I'm constantly looking for ways of talking about it which grind away at the atmosphere it's been given in the past, so focused on individual blame, guilt, sin, and other kinds of unhealthy things, which are, in the long run, contrary to the spirit of Christianity. We need a new understanding of Lent. A new understanding.

So, a last point. This new understanding would require a rethinking of what we mean by sin. I propose that what we ought to mean by sin is anything which keeps us from living out our vocations. It's not necessarily the list of wrongs we've done that is serious, but that which keeps us from responding to God's tug towards the fullness of our own lives. Sin is what keeps us from blossoming into what God desires us to be. Perhaps this gives us a better handle on what it's all about. God wants us to enter into and live through the humanity of Jesus. Anything which keeps us from expressing the fullness of the humanity of Christ within our own lives, that's what needs to be overcome. You don't get to that with the laundry list of do's and don'ts. You don't get to it with social conventions or church traditions. Lent is a season for trying to find, in the small things, in the little bits, traces of God's love for the world, so that we can begin to live inside that love rather than outside it.

That's what Lent's about. Being more concerned with his love than with our sin. Living inside God's love rather than outside it.