

YOU JUST NEVER KNOW

--His name was Wally.

A native-Alamabian, Wally was one of those completely down-to-earth fellows. There was no space, no time, for any sort of pretentiousness about him. With him, what you saw is what you got. He was as real and genuine as they come.

That didn't mean that he was in any way the backward simpleton. In fact, he had quite the brain, in time earning his Ph.D. in Islamic Studies, which required him, of all things, to learn Arabic and spend months in Cairo, Egypt, following his research.

Beyond all this, however, what stood out about Wally was the utter seriousness with which he approached his spiritual life. Oh, I don't mean down on hands and knees groveling before God, or memorizing chapter and verse of every book of the Bible. I mean the sort of spiritual life that involved paying careful attention to the movements of the inner world. After all, that's where the spirits are to be found, and that is where, among them, one hears the soft voice of the Creator, who is also the Re-Creator.

--Over forty years of serving as a pastor, I have sat with all sorts of people who were wrestling with the character and the direction their spiritual lives. Wally, however, was pretty much in a class by himself when it came to being on intimate terms with the subtle ebbs and flows of the interior life.

Among his other distinctive traits, Wally had the particular penchant for coining pithy little phrases by which instructively to capture his spiritual insights.

For example, on more than one occasion, I heard him explain some sticky dilemma that he was encountering with the words, "You just never know what anything is for."

In the basic eight words of Wally's formula, what he was observing is that we can never be completely clear about what's really at stake in anything that we choose to do or choose not to do, nor can we ever be totally confident that we grasp the full magnitude of meaning to anything that happens to us, whether experienced by us as being either "good" or "bad." You see, it's an always very-limited, and usually very biased, ego which arrives at those decisions or makes those judgments, decisions or judgments which over the longer run are often found to have been at least partially--and, not infrequently, largely--in error.

For example, have you ever had the experience of giddily assuming what was a "good" thing wind up producing all sorts of surprising unpleasantness? (You know--be careful what you ask for; you just might get it!) Or, conversely, have you ever had what you firmly believed to be a "bad" thing actually end up being one of the best things that could have happened to you?

That's what Wally was pointing to in his own life. One just never knows for sure. What at first blush seems to be what something is "for"--to affirm us or to defeat us, to build us up or to take us down a rung or two--is discovered frequently over time not to have been the case.

We can strain to do our best to understand what, in any set of circumstances, God might be doing with us (and it is incumbent upon us to do that work), but, since so much of what God is doing with us is, so to speak, taking place behind the curtains, we can never really know for certain if we are getting it right. While we can be sure that everything that happens to us means something, we cannot be sure what exactly that meaning is.

How could something that at the moment felt so good and right produce so much stress and suffering? How

could something that at the moment seemed so bad and wrong yield over time such good results?

It would appear that Wally's observation is absolutely accurate: We do just never know what anything is for.

--That being so, then the next big question pertains to the manner in which one lives in a world where one never fully, transparently knows what anything is for.

We could, I suppose, conclude that all is merely random, chaotic, and meaningless and that, since obvious order and predictability are apparently not in the cards, we are free to do anything that we please; that we can expediently alter our values and our course through life on the basis of any whim at all. If one can't know what anything's for, then all bets are off, and one action is as acceptable as any other, regardless of the damage that might befall other people or creation itself. Heaven knows, there are lots of people who live that way--focused strictly on personal gain, unconcerned totally about personal consequence.

As understandable as such a reaction might be, Jesus suggests that to live like that is tantamount to building foolishly on a precarious foundation of sand. And, if you have ever stood barefooted at the edge of the sea, you know how shifty and insecure a footing in sand can be. "The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell" (Mt 7.27). But of course it did. No one in his or her right mind would have predicted otherwise.

It is the contrary, then, that would be indicated--to build instead on rock, which is to say, to embrace the ambiguities of life and to respond to them by always putting one's best foot forward--in the face of all the existential uncertainty, to behave in the highest possible manner. We may not know with perfect clarity what anything is for, but we can be quite certain that if we consistently come at life from a low place in ourselves, the results, per the sand-part of the parable, are bound to have a lot to do with failure, collapse, and rubble. If we fail to work for the good, then we deserve the not-so-good that is inevitably coming our way.

In a word, if we're going to risk our future, then the most intelligent leap would be in the direction of what potentially will serve us best. Not surprisingly, in Matthew's version of our reading this morning, it is the "wise man" (and, presumably, woman) who takes this course, the vicissitudes of all the rain, flood, and wind in the world unable to bring that house--which is to say, us--down.

--In light of what the smartest path forward is, Jesus asks pointedly, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?" (Lk 6.46). Which is to say, if you get the point here, why aren't you doing something with it? Why aren't you translating what's already in your head into the substance of your life?! Great questions, huh?

As you heard in this morning's reading of these Gospel parallels, both Matthew and Luke agree: It is never just the hearing of Jesus' words, but the hearing followed by the enacting of them that is the avenue to building on rock. And that affords us the assurance that, in a world where we can never be sure what anything is for, we can be absolutely sure that we are standing on the most solid ground that is available to us.

In short, the challenge is always to be doing our best--serious about working to produce our highest, motivated to offer our greatest, dedicated to pursuing our noblest. Granted, one never knows just how big a difference any of that will make, but, if we are coming from a place of rock rather than of sand, we can safely trust that it will make precisely the difference that it is intended to make.

Knowing Wally, I think he'd be pleased to know that we get that.

You do get that, right?

Right?