

Redeeming Stories
Proper 6B, Mark 4.26-34
June 13, 2021
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Last Sunday, we watched our daughter Kate's graduation, huddled around a laptop in a coffee shop a few blocks from campus. Parents weren't allowed to join the black robed scholars in the Poughkeepsie heat, which was sweltering even by Memphis standards. Initially we thought Vassar's banning everyone but the graduates from the ceremony was another casualty of Covid, albeit a small one. Truthfully, the Crafted Kup was our air-conditioned brier patch, replete with snacks and good coffee that we'd been thrown into like Brer Rabbits.

Later that afternoon we left Kate for a last night with her housemates and drove to Rhinebeck to have dinner with our friend Marie. Marie insisted that we first take a swim in the magical black lake near her house. And then, as we dripped dry at the kitchen table, the meandering conversation that began on the dock continued, until Marie stood up and announced: "I'm going to start the pasta. And I can't do two things at once. So, don't ask me any questions." Ardelle said, "How can we help?" And Marie said, "That was a question. I said no questions. Scott, tell us a story."

Now, Marie is a poet. So, even though she's a friend, I felt a certain pressure not just to tell a story, but to tell a good one. But it's a lot easier to be interesting if you haven't just been asked to be interesting. I fumbled around with a few facts from my family history, hoping to get a toehold on something that might unfold into something like a story. I don't think I ever quite got there. But the conversation found its way forward in spite of my ineptitude. Which is a form of failure that's hard to admit, having been reared in the South, where the ability to tell stories is not just a necessary social skill, but something akin to a moral virtue.

But just now, what you might not have noticed is that I've arranged a few details from a day in our lives into a kind of narrative to begin this sermon. It's not exactly Faulkner or Zora Neale Hurston. Which is just as well, as you probably wouldn't want to spend even a Sunday afternoon as one of their characters. But story really is the basic form we use to make sense of our lives and our world, to ourselves and to one another, isn't it? Even in an age obsessed with mere information.

Reynolds Price once wrote, "A need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species *Homo sapiens*—second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home, almost none in silence; the opposite of silence leads quickly to narrative, and the sound of story is the dominant sound of our lives, from the small accounts of our day's events to the vast incommunicable constructs of psychopaths."

In the fourth chapter of Mark, very true to form for Mark, we get very concise versions of two of Jesus's parables about the kingdom of God, or the "reign of God" as some scholars say is a better translation of the active nature of the reality he was describing.

Jesus says the reign of God is "as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how..." And that it's like "a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

And then Mark tells us that “With many such parables [Jesus] spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them *except* in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.”

In other words, the language Jesus used to proclaim the essence of what he was called to proclaim, was not the language of science or of philosophy. It was not the language of history and definitely not the language of theology. He spoke the word only, Mark tells us carefully, in parables.

So instead of a theological system or political agenda, Jesus gives us a farmer sowing seed, sleeping and rising, and grain coming up from the earth. He gives us a mustard seed growing up into branches large enough for the birds of the air to make nests in their shade. And I’d bet my entire collection of CliffsNotes that the question we’d ask Jesus first if he showed up here and started in with his stories would be, “OK. But what’s the point?”

Now, our gospel reading ends with the suggestion that he gave the real skinny to his disciples in private. But if you read the whole of Mark’s gospel, you will not find Jesus’s disciples to be a bunch of those hand waving overachievers in your English class who seem to understand every allusion and metaphor in the day’s assignment. The disciples were every bit as befuddled as the rest of the people Jesus talked to. Remember, this is the gospel that ends, not with the Ascension or the Great Commission, but with two women running from the empty tomb in terror and amazement.

Mark seems to be telling us that there is not a point that can be extracted from the stories. The point, or the power of Jesus’s message is only experienced from *within* the stories. Maybe because, as Flannery O’Connor put it, “A story really isn’t any good unless it successfully resists paraphrase.” The gospel, according to Mark, can’t be paraphrased. It must be entered. Trusted. Experienced. That’s how all true stories work.

Yesterday, I met with a group of concerned history teachers from Grizzlies Prep and several other schools. They had asked me to speak about Nathan Bedford Forrest’s slave market, which was active on Calvary’s block in the mid 19th century. These educators were concerned because the Tennessee legislature has passed a legislation about what they can and cannot teach in their classrooms with regard to the racial history of our country.

I shared some of the historical facts that had been ignored or suppressed when a historical marker about Mr. Forrest’s home went up on our block in 1955, a year after *Brown v. Board of Education* decreed that separate was not equal in the education of Black and white children. I told them that the Tennessee Historical Commission, who had erected the original sign, was not interested in revising the marker when Tim Huebner approached them with research that showed that the “business interests” that made Mr. Forrest wealthy mentioned on that original sign included the buying and selling of human beings.

But what I most wanted the people gathered to hear was how I and so many others were pulled, not into the facts and the statistics of slavery’s legacy in our country, but into the *story* of slavery in this country. In this city. Even on this very block.

Some of you were here on the fourth of April three years ago. It was the 50th anniversary of Dr. King’s assassination, and Calvary held a service of Remembrance and Reconciliation to acknowledge and confess this part of our history.

At the heart of the liturgy was the reading of the names retrieved by the research of Tim and his students of more than 70 people who’d been bought and sold on our block. Dr. Charles McKinney was scheduled to read first, and I remember clearly that he was running late. Charles

slipped into the front row and was handed his list moments before he was to step into the pulpit where he began to read: “Gerry, age 35; Charles, age 48; Dick, age 14; Page, age 9...” And the voice of this charismatic and intrepid Black scholar caught audibly at the child’s age. He continued: “Washington, age 20; Catherine, age 23; John Henry, age 6; Mary Anne, age 3...” And suddenly, for me and for so many others in this room, slavery ceased to be a tragic institution that we could understand in terms of dates and statistics and constitutional amendments. Slavery was children and mothers and teenagers and grandfathers with names and friendships and...stories. People who laughed and loved and maybe even prayed to the same Jesus the men did who looked them up and down before making bids to purchase them, as Forrest and other sellers paraded them around like livestock.

Slavery, in other words, became a story that this middle-aged white man had information about, but had never in his first 50 years on Earth really entered with much more than his head. The truth of all the cruelty and lost lives were the smallest of all seeds until that moment, when they grew up and put forth branches in the shade of which at least a handful of God’s beloved and enslaved children came vividly alive for me.

I know you have stories like this of your own. Moments when the truth about our lives and our world as God sees it is laid bare, either in the unbearable tragedy of their brokenness or the limitless redeeming love of its creator, which really can still shine through it all, in spite of our sins and our distortions. To see suffering and injustice for what it is, is to see people as God sees them. And those glimpses through the lens of divine love can fire us to make the just and merciful reign of God more fully known right now.

“With many such parables [Jesus] spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it.” I believe he still does. I believe, that even in this age of soundbites and fragmented information, we are still able to hear it. And I believe Jesus’s invitation to us is still to trust those moments...those stories. To trust what we’ve experienced when we’ve been drawn into the great story of God’s redeeming love for us and for all people. And then go tell that story from our place within it, living lives of justice and mercy because we have seen for ourselves that there is nothing truer, nothing more real in all the cosmos than that love.