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Pentecost 20B
Peace, Seattle
September 20, 2009 epk
Mark 9:30-37

GOD'S FRAMING STORY, PART TWO

Last week I introduced the concept of a FRAMING STORY, that overarching narrative (or meta-narrative) that provides peoples and cultures with a framework in which they can comprehend reality.

I made the claim that every culture has its own FRAMING STORY, and suggested that, at the time Jesus began his ministry, **Rome owned the FRAMING STORY for the western world** and enforced that FRAME through its military and commercial reach and through **a ruthlessly effective means for dealing with those who opposed the EMPIRE: the cross.**

In the first chapter of Mark's gospel, when Jesus emerges from obscurity to proclaim the nearness of God's reign he is in fact, I suggested, **proclaiming an alternative to EMPIRE.**

DON'T ALLOW YOUR LIVES TO BE FRAMED BY THE NARRATIVES AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE, says Jesus. SITUATE YOURSELVES IN A DIFFERENT STORY, THE GOOD NEWS THAT GOD, NOT CAESAR, IS LORD, AND WE CAN LIVE IN RELATION TO GOD AND GOD'S LOVE RATHER THAN CAESAR AND CAESAR'S POWER.[1]

When Jesus calls his disciples, and that includes us, to follow him ON THE WAY, he is inviting us to live under the influence of a FRAMING STORY different than Rome's story or America's story, or any other FRAMING STORY the world has come up with.

Today's gospel story builds upon last week's episode. We learn that once again Jesus is teaching his disciples that the SON OF MAN will be betrayed, killed, and after three days, will rise again. (Actually the third time…)

And then Mark says of the disciples:
BUT THEY DID NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT HE WAS SAYING AND WERE AFRAID TO ASK HIM.

Well, I get the part about being afraid! The first time the topic had come up Peter had objected, and subsequently felt the full force of Jesus' righteous anger; GET BEHIND ME, SATAN! he said.

Is it any wonder now, that when the topic turns to rejection and death, they're all afraid to ask Jesus what he means? Who wants to volunteer for a dressing down in front of one's peers?

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TOO AFRAID TO ASK?

On Friday morning all Kai wanted to do was stay home and play.

- He did not want to get his shoes on,
- he did not want to get in the car,
- he did not want to go to kindergarten.

At the end of his first full week in school, he was worn out and wanted to go back to the way things used to be, and who can blame him!

[1] Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope*. Thomas Nelson, 2007. Page 90.

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But staying home was not an option. So Chris and I tried a whole panoply of approaches and tactics to help him move beyond his resistance and tears, and nothing was working.

Somewhere in there we mentioned to Kai that if he was tardy, he'd have to stop by the office to get a note before Chris could take him to class. **Big mistake.**

Instead of prompting cooperation, that choice bit of information only added an element of **fear**, inspiring his resistance all the more (though we didn't realize it right away.)

Finally, by stages, we managed to get him out the door and into the car, but still things were unsettled. When we assured him he wouldn't have to go to the school office but could go straight to class, his resistance finally broke. **With fear out of the equation he was able to move on.**

It took a long time after the soul-numbing experience of his crucifixion and the mind-boggling news of his resurrection for Jesus' discipleship community to ASK THE REAL, the TRUE, the ABIDING QUESTIONS that dwelled in the deepest regions of their hearts.

Not that he hadn't encouraged it while he was with them, he had. (Today's gospel not withstanding) It was that they just weren't ready or able to comprehend what he was trying to tell them while he was still with them.

Only when they experienced the unqualified forgiveness, the undeserved grace, and the breaking open of their future by the very one whom they had deserted and betrayed, were they finally able to move beyond paralysis and into mission.

For many people, church remains THE LAST place they would conceive of exposing themselves by asking deep questions. Part of our vision at Peace is cultivating a community life that allows for safe and honest and deep conversations to take place. That's an important part of the gospel's FRAMING STORY, and something we have to devote great care to.

Now, back to today's gospel. When Jesus and his disciples get to where they're going that day, which is Capernaum, the town where Jesus' public ministry began, Jesus asks them a question:

WHAT WERE YOU ARGUING ABOUT ON THE WAY? he says.

And none of them wants to 'fess up; because they'd been having a testosterone-laced discussion about WHO WAS THE GREATEST.

Jesus had invited the Twelve to learn a new way of being in the world, to live by a DIFFERENT FRAMING STORY than the one that has by and large dominated human cultures from the beginning, that MIGHT MAKES RIGHT, that ONLY THE STRONG SURVIVE and that BEING FIRST IS NOT ONLY EVERYTHING—IT'S THE ONLY THING!

This talk about God's anointed one being rejected and killed didn't fit the old template, and no matter how many times Jesus tries to tell them, this new information just didn't penetrate.

But Jesus is not about to give up on them. No, he sits down with them and sketches the outlines of the GOSPEL FRAMING STORY once more:

WHOEVER WANTS TO BE FIRST, MUST BE LAST OF ALL AND SERVANT OF ALL.

And then, driving the point home, he brings a young child into the circle, sits her on his knee, and says: WHOEVER WELCOMES SUCH A CHILD, WELCOMES ME AND WHOEVER WELCOMES ME, WELCOMES THE ONE WHO SENT ME…and a child becomes an emblem of God's FRAMING STORY.

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Children are welcomed here not because they are cute (which they can be).
Not because they entertain us (which they can do).
Not because they will do our bidding (which they do on occasion).
And not because they possess some special quality that adults lack.

Children are welcomed simply because they help us to understand the upside down nature of God's FRAMING STORY, where the last are first, the vulnerable are cared for, and the greatest are servants of all.

One illustration to close:
In the film, TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD, Atticus Finch, an attorney in a small southern town, is serving as defense counsel for a young black man accused of raping a white woman.[2]

The night after the man's arrest Atticus suspects there will be trouble, and so he comes to sit on the jailhouse porch where the defendant is being held.

While he's there a mob of angry white men from the town come with torches, shotguns, and a rope. They don't want a trial; they want to string the defendant up. The situation is tense. Atticus is standing his ground, but he can't hold the mob off much longer.

It's then, just as it appears the tide is going to turn, that Atticus' young daughter, Scout, who has secretly been watching the situation, comes running through the crowd and takes her place on the jailhouse porch by her father's side.

Atticus tells her to go home, but she insists on staying there with him. While she stands there, she looks out over the crowd and starts to recognize the faces of some of the men—they are fathers to some of her friends and schoolmates. She calls out their names--greeting them as only a child in that tense situation could do, and asks them to pass her greeting on to their children.

In her presence the mob of angry men, who moments before were ready to take a man's life, are filled with shame at what they were about to do. The child is a mirror for them.

An awkward silence envelops the mob until one of the leaders turns to go home.
The others soon follow, and Scout becomes the unlikely hero who changes the tide of racism, hatred and violence without lifting a finger. REFRAMING THE STORY

Each of us, wherever we find ourselves on our life journey, have received the call in our baptism, to conform our lives to God's FRAMING STORY, bit by bit, day by day.

Of course we struggle at it—and fail more times that we can count!

But we keep at it, not giving up, because GOD, YOU SEE, REFUSES TO GIVE UP ON US!

When we come to the Table this morning, our Lord meets us one more time with his presence, his gifts, his call to become his body in the world. To be servants to the servant. And what greater gift can there possibly be, than that? Amen.

[2] A Horton Foote screenplay, based on the novel by Harper Lee. Robert Mulligan, director, 1962.