

The Great Reversal

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Mark 5: 21-43; 2 Corinthians 4:7-12

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My friend Tom Long tells the story about a time when he visited a colleague in his new church and got the inevitable facility tour. This is real; ministers do this to each other. I've inflicted a few of them right here at Morningside. Tom remembered the experience by noting the color-coordinated Sunday school classrooms, the lavishly appointed Fellowship Hall, the reverent sanctuary, and then, he says, "For the coup-de-grace, we went out onto the front lawn to get a panoramic view of the building as a whole. And he says, 'It was a magnificent building, neo-gothic, it had a great tower on one corner that reached up into the heavens, and as my eye was following the ascent of that tower, I noticed something very curious: up at the top, there appeared to be plywood boarding up the tower on all four sides. 'What's that?' I said. 'Oh it's some work we're doing on the tower—we're putting in some new stained glass... the people in the town asked us to do it.' 'The people in the town asked you to do it?' 'Yeah, yeah, we used to have stained glass windows up there of the eye of God, you know the one, on the back of the dollar bill? It was illuminated at night, you could see it from all over town, from the mall, from the high school. The people in town said, you know, that gives us the creeps. I mean, we believe in God, we just don't want God looking at us all the time.'"

Tom concluded, "Isn't it interesting that we don't want God looking at us, the God who watches over Israel, who never slumbers nor sleeps...we believe in God, we just don't want him looking at us all the time." Why is that, do you think?

Well, God has certainly gotten an eye-full over the last couple of weeks, wouldn't you say? Americans who pay attention to the news, and even those who don't, have been on a veritable roller coaster for a couple of weeks: From the deep lows of the shootings in Charleston, with all of the important, and I pray, ongoing conversations about race and violence that are demanded by them, to the highs, or at least they were for me, of the Supreme Court ruling in favor of greater inclusivity, greater dignity for LGBT persons. It has been a week of wildly different emotions. God has certainly gotten an eye-full.

There can be no denying that God knows exactly what's going on. We might like to think that God is looking away during our worst moments, but the confessions teach that *God is nearer to us than our very breath*. The Psalmist reminds us that God knit together our inward parts. We may believe in God, all right, but if we don't want God looking at us all the time, we're going to be a bit disappointed.

In his marvelous novel Empire Falls, Richard Russo tells the story of a man named Miles Roby. One day Miles and the priest are musing a bit about what the church building - the particular church building of their church - means to them. As the conversation unfolds, we learn that the priest, Father Mark, remembers that as a child he believed that God lived in the steeple of the church. "It was comforting," he said, "me thinking of the literal proximity of God. When we sing our hymns and in our prayers, we call God down into our midst, which of course, we actually do. God's close, just a couple of stories up."

No, *God is nearer to us than our very breath*. But maybe that's a little too near sometimes. Russo says, as Roby stands in the shadow of his God-haunted steeple, he begins to consider what kind of God watches over us? Although he didn't

consider himself a man up to no good, he said he did admit that he preferred the idea of an all-loving God to an all-knowing God. It pleased him to imagine God as someone like his mother, someone beleaguered by too many responsibilities, too dog-tired to monitor an energetic boy every minute of the day, but who out of love and the occasional fear for his safety would check on him from time to time, whenever she could. Was this so crazy? Surely God must have other projects than humankind, just as a parent has other responsibilities than raising children. He liked the idea of a distractible God, a God who looked in from time to time, shaking his head in wonder. “Jesus, look at what they're up to now!” An idle, daydream deity. (Russo, p 45)

I strongly suspect that at our hearts we want God close by when tragedies and challenges occur, but maybe not all the time. But that's not how it works. God is here for the bad. God is here for the good. It's a package deal. Like it or not, that's the God we get. That's the God we worship.

You've probably heard that we are living in what's called the post-Constantinian era. You remember Constantine. He was the Emperor who made Christianity the state religion of Rome. And it's pretty much stayed that way in various forms, sometimes corrupted and sometimes faithful, for quite a long time, down through the centuries, through several empires, through the Reformation, even right into the 20th century. A scholar named Stanley Hauerwas rather humorously quipped that the Constantinian era came to an end in Greenville, South Carolina, on a Sunday afternoon in the 60s, when he and his buddy went to a movie for the first time in blatant defiance of the expectations that you do nothing on Sunday afternoon.

Whatever it is, whether it's post-Constantinian or something else, we are at a turning point. We are at a turning point. In a Constantinian world where religious authorities exert implicit if not explicit control over the laws of the land, Friday's ruling would have required the church to be in one place, on one page regarding same-gender marriage. And we just aren't. Thank God for the post-Constantinian era.

But truthfully, even more deeply than that, state ordered faith, such as the variety imposed by Constantine on his subjects, is a pale shadow of personal faith. And I would say the same of practice driven out of society ordered faith. If we didn't experience it ourselves, surely we've all heard about that era when on Sunday morning at 11 o'clock, you knew exactly what your place was, and it was in a church pew, pretending at least to praise God. That's a pale shadow of faith also. I'm not at all sure that the relaxation of the social pressure to be in church hasn't resulted in a more faithful church, a church peopled by those whom God has called into this place to seek God, and to want to know where God is to be found. Not because of any external pressure being exerted upon them, but perhaps out of a deep need arising from within their very being, a deep need to know God, to know who God is. Because as we seek to know where God is to be found, whether it's the steeple, or the pew, or closer to us than our very breath, I suspect that most of us aren't really looking to know where God is, as much as we want to know who God is, and what God is about, and what God wants from us.

If you want to know what God is about, what God is like, what God wants from us, we look to Jesus.

Looking for God in Jesus means looking seriously at the whole life of Jesus, as told over the whole of the Gospel, all four accounts. It means looking closely at what Jesus did and what he said, and perhaps just as importantly, looking at what Jesus did not say, and did not do. Perhaps more than anything looking for God in Jesus means looking at how Jesus related to people, because that's what we're seeking - the search for the living God. We're seeking a God who relates to us, who yearns for that deep personal faith, that intimate connection with us *closer than our very breath*.

Last week, as we were going along in the Lectionary, working our way through Mark's Gospel narrative, I told you that no sooner did Jesus make landfall in his little skiff of a boat, than he embarked on what can only be described as a systematic campaign to ritually defile himself. It's fascinating that as he does this, rather than becoming impure himself, Jesus makes those whom he encounters whole. He is not tarnished by his proximity to those seen to be outside the acceptable milieu. Rather, he brings them inside. It reminds me of that marvelous Edwin Markham poem about love drawing a circle to bring the one who wanted to be out, in.

What's fascinating is that the more Jesus touches the unclean, the more people are brought in. It's not so much that Jesus flocks toward the birds of his own feather as it is that those who flock to Jesus become his own feather.

So when in turn, we hear that Jesus is eating, for instance, in the house of Simon the leper, our ears perk up, because here's God, down in the impure and the ungodly. Jesus hasn't just associated with the shut-outs, he's taken up eating with

them. To Mark's deeply Jewish audience, Jesus hasn't so much hit rock bottom, as he has proceeded to dig.

But remember this about Mark's Gospel. We always know more than the characters in the story do. We always know more about what's going to happen. We know, for instance, that this is going to lead to a cross. But we know even more - that the resurrection will follow and redo even the most broken of circumstances. We have the advantage on Mark's initial listeners of knowing the way the story goes, but we also have the disadvantage, because when we know the way the story ends, we can skip straight to the ending. We can go straight to the resurrection. In doing that, we can skip the boundary-breaking ministry of Jesus - to get to the resurrection - and miss the costly nature of grace.

But then, just when we're most tempted to skip straight ahead to the resurrection, we get interrupted by these healing stories. Frankly, they come as a little bit of a surprise, because it doesn't fit the template. It's tempting to think that we can reduce the living God manifested in Jesus Christ to a moral corollary - something along the lines of say, "doing the greatest good for the greatest number," or maybe something a little bit nicer - "never miss an opportunity to alleviate suffering" - all certainly things Jesus seems to have been doing in the first five chapters of Mark. All of a sudden, just when we think we begin to know Jesus as a teacher of ethics and a teacher of new ways of viewing the world, this healing story breaks in. Just when we think we're getting to know Jesus -- this reversal.

Mark seems to delight in telling us how Jesus does the unexpected. I think perhaps he does so because he wants to be just a little bit leery of thinking we've "got Jesus."

I have a friend who will never acknowledge when something is going well for fear it will all fall apart for having been acknowledged. And I think that's a little bit of what Mark is doing here. I think Mark has a Word for us today.

Rarely have I ever had my preaching plans for a month so readily and constantly interrupted. I write my sermons on Thursdays; then Friday happened. I was revising this thing right before we walked in here. Terrible violence demands a serious reckoning with race: The power of symbols one week, and in the very next week, the ruling from the highest court that begs for reckoning on sexuality and how we understand the Bible and each other. Indeed, the ruling begs for the same scrutiny that we need to be placed on race, to be placed on sexuality.

Mark has a Word for us because in just in the moment we think we have finally arrived in our faith - that very moment we think maybe we've got our hands around this Jesus, we have some sense of what Jesus is about and what he wants from us. In that very moment when we most feel secure in Mark's Gospel narrative, we can almost expect that God's going to do something different. The living God can't be contained.

I suspect that the disciples in Mark's Gospel, as their world was turned upside down, felt as many people today feel. While God never wills evil to us, I wonder sometimes if God doesn't *like* us just a little bit unsettled. I wonder sometimes if God doesn't like us just a little bit on edge, because then we're a little bit more receptive to what God might have to say to us and what God might be doing.

Right here in this is moment of these healing stories, you see, the disciples think they've finally gotten their heads around Jesus. They think he's about to do something predictable, about to do something respectable even. He is going to go to the house of the synagogue leader, and he's going to heal the daughter. What better press could there possibly be? But then embedded in this story is a quick reminder from Mark not to get too comfortable, because within this healing story is another one. It's a microcosm; everything that Jesus has been talking about is wrapped up in this woman, in her story, in the reality that a) she's a woman, that b) she is impure ritually. All of this is coming together so that when Jesus is touched by her, the story again has that instant reversal.

And here's the thing about Mark - you need to remember it - Mark never does anything accidentally. It's always on purpose. In that short Gospel, the words are carefully chosen. It is full of reversals, and it is full of foreshadowing. There is always a hint of what is coming. Throughout Mark's Gospel narrative, Jesus is constantly predicting his suffering and his death. Novelist Reynolds Price once described Mark's Gospel account as a passion narrative with an extended introduction.

All of those passion predictions begin to make sense when we think of the series of reversals that Mark has embedded into the story. Suddenly, these stories begin to prefigure the costly nature of grace, and we realized this reversal, this quick little healing story embedded in another healing story, is indicative of far more reversals - that another one will follow and another one and another one, and that, friends, ought to tell us what God is like.

Because God is never satisfied with things the way they are, God is always working for redemption, always working to bring us to that place where we are most receptive to that deep intimate relationship with God. We can't control it, can't even say when it will happen. At best, we can place ourselves, as we do today, in the position to hear God's Word and to be receptive to God's Word.

But make no mistake about it, we're never in control of this endeavor called faith. Perhaps that's why Calvin reminds us that faith is a gift from God. It's not something we achieve on our own. It comes from God. If we will look to Jesus' words, his works, we may come to know God. In that sense, to understand what God is doing so that when we encounter those moments that shake our foundations, the end result isn't a bunch of rubble on the ground, but rather, creative, life-giving, new ways of seeing faith.

How is this going to shape us? How is this going to change us into the people God is turning us into? Paul gives us this image of a treasure in clay jars. When I think about that, I find the image of God even more daunting, because a treasure in clay jars is an awfully problematic thing. God is revealed through Jesus dwelling in us. I get all that, but there's a part of me that wishes the treasure didn't have quite so much clay wrapped around it. But that's the way God works.

I suppose what I'm saying is that when we act like Jesus, the world sees a little more of what God is like. The God who forever watches over us, the God who breaks in when we least expect it. Like I said, Mark's Gospel narrative is getting us set up, primed for a great reversal coming that only God can bring.

So let me close with another story. This one comes from my friend Brian Blount. He's writing about another colleague, the late Don Juel, a marvelous New Testament scholar, who was teaching a class one day. And you remember, as we read, at the end of Mark's Gospel account when all of this has been achieved, there is that cataclysmic moment when the temple curtain is ripped from top to bottom. Well, as Don was teaching this class to high school students, about the tearing of the temple curtain at the crucifixion of Jesus, he said that means we have access to God. Dr. Juel was going along, feeling pretty good about the class he was teaching to these young folks. Then a young man in the group raised his hand and said, "I have something!" Dr. Juel nodded and said yes. The young man said, "I think you have it wrong." Imagine that, Dr. Blount writes. A young man who gets all his Bible study in Sunday School one day a week tells a man who holds a Ph.D. in Biblical studies, a man who has studied the Bible every day of his life for years, in Greek and Hebrew, no less, that he has it wrong, and he, the teenager has it right. Well, my colleague listened for what he had to say, and he told me what that young man said changed forever the way he looks at that passage. In a reversal worthy of Mark, the young man said, 'I don't think it means we now have access to God, I think it means that all of the sudden, God has access to us.' All of the sudden, the God we trapped behind the curtain is loose."

It's the great reversal. Just when the mechanisms and symbols we designed to contain God into a few books or a few laws are yanked down, just when we let them get out of the way and give up their control over our lives, God has access to us again.

Remember who put the curtain up. It wasn't God. Just think, with those curtains ripped down, what is God going to do next?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.