

Pentecost 19, Proper 21
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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The Eye of the Story

My wife and I are enjoying reruns of Northern Exposure. On our way back from seeing our kids recently we even turned off and visited Roslyn. We ate at The Brick, and walked the streets for a while. In a recent episode, Leonard, the native healer, sets out to learn the healing stories of White people. He interviews a bunch of folks and is left shaking his head. All he gets are urban legends, kidneys stolen while in a drunken stupor, a chicken served at a restaurant that turned out NOT to be chicken, these kinds of things. He can't see how they heal. Toward the end, however, he spends some time with his nephew, Ed. Ed is a movie buff. Leonard is no slouch in that regard either. Both begin to cite scenes from good movies. It dawns on Leonard. White people tell the stories that heal them in the movie theater. Here is where so many of the deep archetypal images and emotions are expressed that form the deep culture of dominant US White culture.

He says something I have thought for some time. Stories make and break us. The Bosses recently attended an event at the Swinomish Tribal Library. At it, stories were told coming from Native, Black and Anglo sources. They are wisdom stories, stories meant to set us right again. This is what the power of story is. We tell wise stories and we are wise. We tell loving stories and we become loving. We tell foolish stories and we destroy one another. The theater is where cultures of European extraction have done it for a very long time. Shakespeare's Globe was one step along a path from ancient Greece, through Rome, the medieval age, the Renaissance and through to our times. Movies are the medium of today.

The theater is not the only place where powerful stories are told. We do so here. I describe it (and the metaphor is not original with me) as a drama, a play in two acts. We sing, we pray, we learn and we eat a meal together. All of it expresses the core of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Touching this foundation sets us on the right footing for how to live in the world. It heals us by setting us in the story of Jesus in the world.

I think this is something that is easy to forget. We get lazy in our thinking. We dumb down, and do not go to the work of looking deeply, listening with the heart, knowing with the Spirit what is said and done here. We glide easily over well-worn paths, forgetting where they take us or why. Then the status quo goes unquestioned, and we perpetuate rather than address the rips and tears in our society that need healing rather than affirmation.

Today's Gospel reminds us. John runs into some people who are healing people in Jesus' name, but they aren't part of the "in group." Obviously interlopers, he tries to make them stop, and then he comes and tattles on them to Jesus, sure that Jesus will utter the ultimate ultimatum. In a sense, he does, but not like John expects. "He who is not against us is for us." *You forget, John, that this Kingdom thing is bigger than we are. It's not just*

about me, it's about the healing and restoration of the world. If these people are doing that, even if in a small way, then we shouldn't get in their way.

Jesus then segways seamlessly into a passage that has troubled many people needlessly. Jesus is NOT advocating self-mutilation for the sake of one's soul. That interpretation has been the source of unimaginable suffering and harm done to body and soul over the centuries. Tragically, it misses the point entirely. "Offense" here, as in, "if your eye offends you," is clearly defined in the text itself. Anyone who would put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believes in me...standing in the way, blocking the path, excluding, these are the things that offend. It is not some internal flaw that wars against the soul. It has to do with how we treat the "little ones," the vulnerable ones, the voiceless ones, the powerless ones, all those whose love places them squarely in the Kingdom, even if we can't see it.

This Kingdom thing requires sacrifice for the sake of the little ones. To try to do otherwise is to stand in the way of the Kingdom, to put oneself in the place of God, to try to grab hold of, control and own the Great Mystery itself. It is the height of egocentrism. If my eye or hand or foot offends me, it is because it is in service to the ego rather than love. The metaphor of cutting off and plucking out refers to bringing the ego back in line and surrendering it to love. We do that through the stories that heal.

My sister tells the story of going to a soccer game between the missionary-kid school we attended and one of the local high schools. Fans from both schools gathered at the missionary school, taking their respective sides of the field in the bleachers. She had friends on the opposing team and in their fan-base. Never a big sports fan, but committed to her friends, she audaciously went and sat with them in their bleachers. She got a comment from one of the teachers at the school. "We're here to convert them not to befriend them." *Anyone who would put a stumbling block...*

I ask myself, with what kind of eye are they seeing? What kind of story are they telling about Jesus and themselves that they could hold the Ecuadorians up as targets, objects of their efforts, and not people? Certainly not one my sister told herself. Certainly not one my parents told us about the local people. My parents' story was told in action. Tsachi people gathered on our porch in the evenings to buy things in my parents' store and shoot the breeze, my father, faithfully walking miles every day to administer penicillin to tuberculosis patients, and their pain and lament at having to leave the tribe when it was time to bid goodbye. The results of their story shone brightly when a plot in the tribal cemetery was offered as their final resting place. My mother and father told a different kind of story and it gave them a different kind of eye. When we pluck out the eye that sees only with the ego, when we reign our own selves in, we make room for ourselves AND others. Our world is not diminished, it grows. The end result is not of deformity, but of completeness. "Have salt in yourselves," Jesus says, "and be at peace with one another."

Learn to tell stories of peace, not division, of inclusion, not exclusion and you will see with a different eye.

In a recent visit with one of our folks, mention was made that the school district is shifting in culture. With more than half the students of Hispanic origin, with parents who are vocal advocates, a different voice is being heard—and listened to. The school where my wife teaches is a duo-language school. All the kids get instruction in both English and Spanish. With what kind of eye is the School District seeing it's people?

Here at St. Paul's we are talking about a merger with Resurrección. Right now, there are two stories.

St. Paul's was established in following the first Episcopal service here in 1891. By the turn of the century, it had its own building on the corner of Kincaid and 3rd, across from where the new Library Commons now stands. Throughout the years it grew and prospered, populated as most Episcopal churches were, by the non-Catholic elite of the town. In 1960 this building was consecrated and the church has lived here ever since. The winds of time that have blown against all main-line denominations have had their effect on us as well. We are now an older almost entirely White congregation with a rich history and an uncertain future.

Resurrección was begun as an outreach to migrant workers in the Valley. The founder, the Rev. Jo Beecher, along with Tom Worrell and others, worked tirelessly to provide not just religious services, but social and legal advocacy. When Rev. Beecher retired, the church shrank. Benefits that flowed through Resurrección were now being provided by other agencies in town, lessening the congregation's footprint in the social action arena. With less to come for, less came. But the congregation endured. They are their own congregation, a Mission Station (not a full Mission). They have seen their ups and downs as well as clergy with differing capacities in language and culture have been assigned here. Constant through the years have been two people. Francisco López was originally hired by the congregation as a lay pastor and music director. When grant money ran out he took other employment, but he still directs the music. Baudelina Paz grew up in this congregation, went through the Iona School and was ordained deacon and priest. She is now doing a two-year curacy (kind of like an internship) in Renton, so she is not here. She functioned as lay, and then ordained pastor alongside me and under my direction while she was here. Now we are rebuilding on a slightly different foundation. People who are not part of the migrant worker population are among us along side those who have remained of the original ones. We are more diverse, and we are working hard on leadership formation.

The story of St. Paul's and Resurrección began in 2002 when the then rector invited Resurrección to meet here and gave them office space. They met back in the fireside room until they outgrew it, and were invited to use the Nave and main Altar. I have been told that there was pushback from the congregation of St. Paul's because the decision to bring them in was done unilaterally by the rector and Rev. Beecher without Vestry or congregational input. St. Paul's people felt put upon. If those feelings are still around, they have morphed into other forms or gone underground. Some of you express a desire to join with them and them with us whenever possible, and others are more reserved.

From the beginning and to this day, they pay St. Paul's rent. It is a ridiculously symbolic sum, but it is rent, nonetheless. They have their own nascent Bishop's Committee and Altar Guild. To do anything here beyond the regularly programmed activities they ask permission. I would venture that they are generally loved by St. Paul's, and we want to be generous, but they are tenants and we are the landlords. They do not have a voice in our decision-making circles. With what kind of eye do we see them?

A merger would pluck out the current eye with its story and replace it with something else, a broader sense of who we are, no longer just an older White congregation that hosts a younger Hispanic one, but a multi-ethnic congregation, one family with two cultural expressions. No longer tenants, they would belong. We would all belong. Works of wonder done by them or us, it wouldn't matter. Whoever is not against us is for us. We would all be "for us."

But that's just here at Church. How about elsewhere? Whom do we see with an eye that excludes seen sideways, in the periphery, and never fully human, people about whom stories are told that keep them on the sidelines? Stories like, "illegal immigrants are all violent criminals swarming across our borders, drug traffickers, murderers and rapists, all come to degrade our pure, godly, White culture," when actually, the rate of violent crime in the immigrant population is around half of what it is in the population at large. In other words, if you see with a truthful eye, it's twice as safe to live among immigrants than among the rest of the population.

If your eye offends.... Pluck out the eye that offends... With what eye do you see?