

“Faith that Frees the Heart” / Luke 13:10-17 / 25 August 2013

My heart goes out to the lady in today's gospel reading, bent over for eighteen long years. But do you know who I really pity? I feel bad for the poor guy who serves as this story's minor villain, the leader of the synagogue. I mean, this man has a religious institution to run. It's not easy work—as I know right well. There are protocols that you have to follow, or else it all degenerates into chaos. This story portrays him flatly as the antagonist, but he's surely not an altogether bad fellow. What if the seeming-villain of this narrative is just a guy who holds onto good things in all the wrong ways? Couldn't we all be accused of that?

Rifling through a used-book store in some antique neighborhood of Cincinnati last month, I discovered the fiction of John Gardner. Gardner was a novelist who died young in a motorcycle accident in the early 80s. He was living in Pennsylvania when he died, but more interesting to me was the fact that he grew up in the Presbyterian church in Batavia, New York...where a friend of mine is now the pastor. I like the way Gardner's books often depict clergy as freewheeling, highly intelligent meddlers. In one of his novels, he says in passing that the Congregationalist minister (a minor character) had marched at Selma, which as you may know, the founding pastor of this congregation did in real life. Gardner's novels reveal a lot about the writer's personal struggles with faith, meaning, good and evil. He's best known nowadays for his book *Grendel*, which retells the old epic poem *Beowulf* from the villain's point of view. It got me to thinking: What if we could hear more stories (perhaps even today's gospel reading) from the other guy's point of view?

What if George Lucas came out with a retelling of *Star Wars* from the Emperor's standpoint? What if, after all these years of blind terror in the ocean, we could finally see what old Jaws the shark was thinking when he threw his tribal instincts to the wind and decided to wage war on humankind? We might find that he was acting out of some long-ago trauma; maybe some fisherman's hook got caught in his gills when he was an infant sharkling, and so he committed himself to a life of retributive justice for all fishes. Maybe Jaws knew the harm that humanity was inflicting on the oceans of the world, and took it upon himself to rid the waters of the human scourge in the only way he knew how.

Not just in novels and movies, but in real life, what if our seeming-enemies got to tell their side of the story? The Japanese and the Germans were so vilified in this country sixty years ago. What if we could hear their experience of the war—a war that most of them didn't want either? The Russians who were painted in such harsh colors! As a child, I recall playing with toy guns, shooting Russians, and Germans, and Japanese—though my playmates and I had all learned from our parents and grandparents to call those nationalities by more colorful names!

As my family and I visited Pearl Harbor earlier this month, my thoughts drifted back over the years to my maternal grandfather, who served on a ship in the Pacific during that horrific war. I knew him only as a quiet man, a gentle-if-stubborn old fellow, who wanted little else from life than to grow nice cabbages in his backyard garden, a man who loved to spend hours in his basement making wooden furniture as gifts to his family members—tables that wobbled, chairs that felt unsafe to sit on. He talked about the war sometimes, but none of us children ever really understood how it haunted him still. And yet, this man too, this quiet, harmless old fundamentalist Methodist was once portrayed as someone's villain. In those old Japanese cartoons that are on display at Pearl Harbor, he is depicted as hairy, round-eyed monster, a menace to all things wholesome and good. In real life, he was only a menace to potato bugs and—well—anyone who tried to sit on his homemade chairs.

The Spirit calls us to “hear the voices of peoples long silenced.” In this vast, unending drama of life on earth, doesn't each person have his or her own story to tell? And haven't the great majority of voices been silenced from the telling? Wouldn't we—all of us—find that we are the villain in someone's version of the drama? In some cases, like the leader of the synagogue in Jesus' days, we have all held fast to good things but in the wrong ways, and sometimes our tight grip has put us on the wrong side in the end.

In today's gospel lesson from Luke, we find an unnamed religious leader, some poor village

rabbi, protesting that Jesus—this upstart prophet—should not be healing in the synagogue on the Sabbath. “Come and get healed on a Thursday or a Monday,” he says. “But on the Sabbath day, we've got a worship bulletin to follow...one that I spent a whole week preparing.” The leader of the synagogue just wants the weekly service to run smoothly, and supernatural healings are a disorderly spectacle. He can't see that Jesus is called to something bigger than church-as-usual. But even as I read this miracle account in the Gospel of Luke, I'm aware that all stories have two sides—or more. History and Luke's gospel have told us to be on Jesus' side. The village rabbi is just a straw man, a foil for all of Jesus' goodness and enlightenment. But what might it look like if the rabbi had written his own version of this story? I admit that, as a relatively obscure religious leader myself, I have sympathy for the village rabbi's conundrum. All of us who invest our lives in unwieldy institutions—schools, charities, social services, churches—all of us can see this story from the rabbi's perspective. We're not bad people. We do good things...but just occasionally our well-intentioned institutions, even our churches, with all their traditions and protocols, end up getting in the way of actual healing and well-being. And that's when it's time to rethink the way we do things.

In a *Non Sequitur* cartoon, a man arrives in the afterlife. A sign at the gate says, “Welcome to Heaven. Keep your religion to yourself.” An angel standing by tells him, “Ironically, that's why it's so peaceful here.” We cannot deny that many people down through history, and to the present day, have held their faith like a weapon. But religion was just going peacefully about its business on that Sabbath day, so long ago. Religion was just doing what religions do on their holy days. It wasn't healing anybody's body, but it might have been healing people's spirits, as meaningful rituals sometimes do. Religion was just acting out its ancient traditions of Scripture, liturgy, sacred story, and song. Religious faith was being good that day, but the leader of the synagogue was holding on to good religion in all the wrong ways—inflexibly, with a closed attitude, too focused on other things to rejoice in a surprise healing.

Sometimes we hold good things, like religious faith, in bad ways. It's like carrying a paring knife by the blade. A knife is a good thing; how else would you peel your potatoes? But it has to be held correctly, respectfully, or it's capable of doing more harm than good. Our faith is the same. The idolatry of religion is treating the system as more important than the truth, and the kindness, and the love that the system should inspire in our living. Our religion is good as long as it points us toward a faith that frees the heart, that unbinds our spirits, and maybe even straightens out our bent backs, helps us to hold our heads high...and treat others as we wish to be treated.

And ironically enough, when grace manages to come bursting through the very same religious systems that were meant to channel it, that grace still somehow comes as a surprise, like a tired, bent old woman being made whole and well on the Sabbath day! Why should that surprise or upset anyone? The Sabbath was supposed to be about wholeness and restoration. The Sabbath day that—at its origins—was never intended for solemnity and gloom, but for human wholeness, for joy, and renewal of body and spirit. It's interesting that our text talks about “a spirit that crippled her.” It implies a psychosomatic element in her ailment, as if she was crippled as much by sadness or anxiety as by osteoporosis. And aren't sadness and anxiety two of the things that faith—religious faith held rightly—is meant to help cure? Aren't our best Sabbaths the days that ring with laughter, and loud greetings, and noisy children? If you've ever been to a church without those things, then you know what I mean.

Who are the good guys in our world today? Who are the bad? And do those terms even make any sense at all? The closer you look, the harder it is to think that there are simply good and bad people in the world. Every one of us has made the mistake of holding good things in all the wrong ways. We do it in our relationships. We do it with our money. We do it with our power. We do it with our freedoms. We do it in our commitments to causes, and institutions, and to organizations, and clubs. Sometimes we even hold our faith—our church—in the wrong way. But don't be surprised when faith comes along to free the heart, to unbend the spirit. Never be surprised when grace shows up in the very

place where it was always meant to be. Amen.