

Pitched between Fear and Faith

Mark 4:35-41

Sunday, June 21, 2015

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Today, we hear a story of competing narratives – a narrative of fear, and a narrative of faith. And today is Father’s Day. We who honor fathers honor them because of the narratives with which they form their children. Today, I thank God for the formation I received from my Dad, and I pray that my words live up to the formation I received from him.

Our text today is one of competing narratives – the narrative of fear and the narrative of faith. These two are always in competition, and they compete for time and attention in this story as well. Jesus has been teaching the crowds by the sea, and this text starts with his suggestion, “Let us go over to the other side.”

Let us go over to the other side – the Gentile side. Let us go over where those we call “the others”, where those who are “not part of us” live. In crossing the sea, they are crossing a social boundary -- going where the others – those who are different – live.

And while they were on the water, a great windstorm arose, and the boat was in the process of being swamped. And the disciples wake up a sleeping Jesus with the question – Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?

Do you not care that we are perishing?

This has been a week in which we have heard competing narratives in our news. The news out of Charleston has been so hard to hear – and it has been rife with competing narratives. Those who follow, like the first disciples who followed Jesus into the boat, might well be thinking that a journey into foreign territory sounds risky. That even here at home, even in their own churches, some of the faithful, it must be said, are in mortal danger.

And the same debates – the same kinds of competing narratives – are heard that have been voiced countless times before. Was the shooter a terrorist, or simply a misguided, mentally ill young man? Was this, what happened in Charleston, about race, or was it about faith, or was it about neither?

Politicians and commentators have found a variety of ways to talk about the murders. They have been called “an accident that will give ammunition (pun intended) to those who want to take guns away from us”. And “a tragic event masterminded by one bad apple, that says nothing about the greater community at all”. And something that would have been prevented, if only the pastor, who was also a legislator, was carrying a gun – taking the tack of blaming the victims for their own victimization. And many have suggested that what occurred “is in no way related to the race of those who died”.

Since the murders on Wednesday, four black churches have been evacuated – three of them during prayer vigils honoring those who died in Charleston. Four churches have been evacuated –four black churches – because of bomb threats. Bomb threats on the gathering places where people have been called together to pray, to ask God for help, and to lament because the police in each of these jurisdictions found the threats to be credible.

So is the race of those who died an issue? Is it a factor in what happened – or is it not?

In my own ministry, in every single position, I have served as the first woman in the job, and my gender has always, every time, been part of the conversation in the interview process, and some folks in every congregation have let me know that my gender is an issue for them in my ministry relationship with them. Some folks are tickled – they are thrilled that a woman pastor has been called! And there are others, usually a greater number, who say that it makes it hard for them to receive ministry from me

My husband, who has served congregations as long as I have, has yet to have anyone suggest that his maleness – his lack of femaleness – is something that creates a barrier for them. His regrettable lack of female anatomy has yet to be raised in an interview process.

So when people suggest to us that gender no longer plays a role in how people are viewed in ministry, or how one's ministry is received, we hear this in light of our experience.

In the same way, people of faith, brothers and sisters of ours in Christ, who are African-American may hear the suggestion that attacks that occur are not related to their race – that there is nothing to fear – and that there is nothing that can be done – that African-Americans, and African-American Christians and churches in particular are not at particular risk – they will hear this in light of their own experience. Experience like the 225 suspicious fires at black churches in an 18 month period in 1995-96, a bad enough spate that the Justice Dept opened an investigation, and congressional hearings were held. Most of those crimes were never solved.

Google “attacks on black churches” and hundreds of articles will immediately surface, many of which will share the troubling information that attacks on black churches continue to plague the African-American Christian community – cross-burnings, bombings, vandalism, burnings and bombings – and that when the perpetrators are found, they are white persons, most of whom are found to be part of one or another, or multiple, white supremacist organizations. These organizations have gained size and influence since 2008, and law enforcement agencies in many states track their movements and activities, and suggest that they are becoming more dangerous, a truth that undoubtedly colors the way African-American Christians see the issue of risk or safety.

The drama in our text today happens on the sea. Scholars tell us this is not coincidental. The sea is the biblical site of chaos. The sea is the chaotic home, in biblical understanding, of the forces of evil and disorder. It is a place the breeds and feeds the narrative of fear.

The creation starts in the midst of the chaos of the sea, where God's Spirit is brooding over the face of the waters, and the creation is formless and void. And in Genesis 1 and 2 God sets limits and boundaries on the sea. God makes light and thus night and day, and then God puts a dome in the waters – we're talking ancient cosmology here – that the chaos is kept outside what we now call the firmament.

The chaotic sea breaks into human life and biblical text again, during the flood, where the dome that God set up springs leaks top to bottom, and the water comes from every direction. And until God decides to end the flood, the water keeps coming. But God DOES decide to end the flood and to save humanity and the earth ,and promises never to destroy the earth again.

The sea is a place of chaos and danger for the Israelites in their flight from Egypt, until God enters the sea and makes a path for them to cross on dry land.

The sea becomes chaotic in our text. A sudden windstorm blows up and the boat – and the disciples – are at risk of going down.

This week has provided ample evidence, if we needed it, that the forces of chaos, of disorder and evil, continue to thrive. These forces drive and animate the narrative of fear. Indeed, they feed on fear. The forces of chaos draw energy from faulty presumptions, from misapprehensions and misunderstandings, particularly among those who follow Jesus.

When we misunderstand what is happening – when we do not engage the realities, however difficult, that emerge – when we fail to ponder, because we are busy, because life intervenes, or we see what is happening in a place like Charleston, and a church like Emmanuel AME, as totally unrelated to us;

When we do not see that we are as closely related to those brothers and sisters who died at Bible study, as we are to those who sit with us in the pew here today, that we are part of them and they are part of us – that their joys are our joys, their pain our pain’

When we fail to have faith in Jesus as One who has come to save us all, and who loves us all, and who values and gives worth and wonder and joy to us all –

we encourage and animate the forces of chaos and disorder. We give power to the narrative of fear.

Remember, both those who died, and the one who murdered them – all were active members of the Christian church.

Why are black churches a particular target of those who traffic in the narrative of fear? Because they traffic in the narrative of faith. Because they offer, to people who hear much too often that they are not worthy, that they are of little value, that they do not matter – they offer a competing narrative: one of hope, joy, love, peace, value. A narrative that is committed to all being welcome and all being granted redemption and release – not based on skin color, nor type of hair, nor bank account. No – based only on the love God has for each one of us. African-American churches sound this narrative, the narrative of faith, and those who sound and feed on and draw energy from the narrative of fear – they want to silence any narrative that competes with theirs for attention.

What narrative are we sounding?

What narrative works for us?

Friends, it is one thing to be a member of a body that professes belief in Christ in its organizing documents. It is another thing to embody and practice and live a theology of peace, of liberation, of freedom and justice, of resurrection in the name and spirit of Christ.

It is another thing – it is a narrative that competes with fear and hatred and violence and bloodshed – to believe that we are all children of God.

Friends, when we see faith in Jesus as a private matter, we can unwittingly unintentionally collaborate with the narrative of fear.

If we see faith as private, and we hear racist comments, and encounter bigotry, among our friends, or our families, or our coworkers – private faith that we keep to ourselves will not empower us to challenge these voices of the narrative of fear. And in so doing, we may offer the sense that to follow Jesus includes permission to see some people as lesser, to view some of those whom God has made as subordinate, and among followers of Jesus – to demonstrate to those around us that there are tiers – levels – in the Body of Christ – such that it is

okay – valid—part of our faith practice – to deny full personhood to some people whom Jesus has made our sisters and brothers.

The idea – the thought – the conceived plan – to massacre black people engaged in Bible study because they have to be stopped, because They are taking over our country – as the shooter shared before he shot; the idea to attack African-American churches – the idea to threaten to bomb a prayer vigil being held at a black church: these do not spring from nowhere. They are formed, they are part of a misguided theology, or ideology of fear. Young people who come to have these ideas, they learn them from adults – adults who are captivated by fear. They are part of a lived theology, a lived ideology, that many Christians embody and practice thoughtlessly, because they do not understand how vicious – how deadly – this competition between narratives can be.

And if radical groups target young people, as it seems this young man was targeted, the church must be crystal clear. We in the church must make sure people understand what we are about. We who follow Jesus must challenge narratives that are not the Gospel. We are called to share the narrative, the Gospel narrative, that offers life instead of death, hope instead of despair, love instead of hate, faith instead of fear. This gives urgency to our ministry with youth, with young adults, and with children, that they be heard and be formed with the narrative by which and through which we live.

In response to the disciples' crying out, Jesus speaks to the wind. Jesus rebukes the storm. Peace! Be still! Our English text says -- which is in the imperative, as the grammarians in the crowd will be happy to remind you. But the Greek is even stronger.

The literal meaning of the Greek is **BE SILENT! BE MUZZLED!**

In the same way that Jesus rebuked unclean spirits, he rebukes the death-dealing forces of chaos, disorder, and evil in the storm. He rebukes the narrative that teaches powerlessness and despair. He rebukes the story that leads to death. He rebukes the narrative of fear.

Jesus has power over those forces. Jesus gives that power to us. We have power over the death-dealing forces of chaos, disorder, and evil in our midst. We are called by Jesus to have faith – faith strong enough to stand up in the face of chaos, disorder, and evil – to stand up to these forces – to be those heard sounding the narrative of faith.

We are called to the same faith that enlivens and upholds members and leaders of Emmanuel AME church in Charleston, who are holding services today, and of Bishop Norvel Goff – appointed to lead the congregation until a new pastor is found to replace Pastor Clementa C Pinckney, the pastor of the historic congregation, who was killed with his parishioners – Bishop Norvel Goff – who stated yesterday that services will be held as usual, to make the point that faith is stronger than fear, hope stronger than death.

We are called to the same faith as my many African-American pastor colleagues across the nation, some of whom pastor congregations that have received threats, who will climb into their pulpits today, believing in Jesus and his power to save.

We are called to have faith – and to speak the narrative of faith – faith as strong as those who are in peril – faith that redeems, that saves, that transforms.

And to the extent that understanding all of this and working toward empathy with our African-American brothers and sisters in Christ is for us a journey to the other side – a journey to a land we do not know nor understand – Jesus calls us to that as well.

Let us go over to the other side. Let us see Christ in the faces of those brothers and sisters whose life experience is so very different from our own. And let us stand with them, supporting one another, that our faith may be stronger than our fear.