

Living with Our Story – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

I Samuel 8:4-20, 11:14-15; Psalm 138, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

We will come back to this intriguing and provocative Gospel lesson later in my sermon, but before we do that, I want you to think about some of your favorite stories—the stories you read or hear or watch again and again. Are there any of those stories that you would revise if you could? Do you ever wish you could change something in them so that you didn't have to endure the same pain they always bring?

I was reminded of this type of yearning to “rewrite the story” as I reread Willa Cather's novel *O Pioneers* last week for my book group. If you aren't familiar with Willa Cather, she was an important American novelist in the early 20th century, and she's a favorite author of mine. In *O Pioneers* she chronicles the life of the Bergson family, Swedish immigrants who settle on the Nebraska Divide near the end of the nineteenth century. Alexandra Bergson, the strong sister and matriarch/patriarch of the family, leads the Bergsons as they successfully transform the harsh Nebraska prairie into a profitable farm at a time when most of their neighbors were packing up and moving elsewhere. Near the end of the novel, the younger brother she has raised like a son and in whom she places her hope for the future is tragically murdered in large part because of poor choices he makes. Every time I read *O Pioneers* I hope, no I think I literally pray, that Emil will choose differently. But tragically, his choices remain the same with each of my readings.

The same is true with all good stories. No matter how much we hope, we can't change the tragic choices that some characters make. It's not like the video game *Super Mario Galaxy* where the person with the Wii remote can rewrite Mario's story each time the game is played as they try to advance him little by little through each of the game's 42 galaxies. In a story, the words are forever set on the page—whether those pages are physical or electronic. In a movie the images are forever cast on celluloid, acetate, or polyester film or as digital zeros and ones. Romeo always lets his hot temper, impetuosity, pride, and family history direct his choices rather than catching his breath and allowing reason to guide him. Boromir always allows his greed for the ring to overwhelm him, leading him to his own death at the hands of Orcs and Frodo's isolation from the other members of the Fellowship of the Ring. Edmund always sneaks away after that Turkish delight. And Scarlett O'Hara never gives Rhett Butler a reason to “give a damn.” (For people like my daughter and my Godly Play friends who were born after 1980 and who have never experienced a nearly-four hour movie with an intermission in the theater, I wasn't just cussing. I was simply quoting from the 1939 historical epic film *Gone with the Wind* in which the tragic heroine Scarlett O'Hara spends the film making choices that alienate the people who care about her most and making me squirm in my seat with frustration. I've never

read the 1000-plus page popular novel on which the movie is based simply because I don't think I could endure that many pages of pain.) Anyway, no matter how much we hope and pray that all these characters will make better choices the next time, we can't rewrite the stories that have been written before us.

I find myself experiencing this same yearning to rewrite the story each time I read the Genesis primordial account. Don't you wish that we could rewrite the story and make the serpent less wily, less convincing, and the woman and man stronger, more determined to be faithful to God? In the specific part we have before us today, I would especially like to rewrite the main characters' lines so that there is less blaming of one another and more ownership of their bad choices. Obviously the author of Genesis didn't have a good editor. Or did he? A good story shows us the truth. I'm going to say that again—a good story shows us the truth. That doesn't mean that every story is true or that every story really happened, but it means that we will find truth in or through a good story. And whether we like it or not, we can usually find more truth in the character who fails than in the one that does everything right.

Throughout Christian history, thoughtful scholars looking at the good story we find in the Genesis account of the garden have disagreed about how to interpret the truth that is found there. Did God intend for humankind to fall? Our church fathers, philosophers, theologians, poets, and lay leaders in small town churches have all debated this idea of the "felix culpa," the "happy" or "fortunate fault." Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Wesley, and countless others at various times have supported the idea that the fall was a part of God's plan. In the good story Paradise Lost John Milton even has the archangel Michael console the fallen Adam by telling him that Christ would come as redeemer and judge of the world "to reward . . . and receive them into bliss, . . . [into] a far happier place/ Then this of EDEN. . .". To this description of the better world that awaits them, Milton's Adam responds:

"O goodness infinite, goodness immense!
That all this good of evil shall produce,
And evil turn to good; more wonderful
Then that which by creation first brought forth
Light out of darkness! full of doubt I stand,
Whether I should repent me now of sin
By mee done and occasiond, or rejoyce
Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring," (Book X).

If you didn't get all that, Milton's Adam is confused about whether he should repent of his sin or rejoice that he took the fruit from Eve and thus set in motion the creation of an even better world than the one God had originally designed. Whether the fall was God's plan A or plan B or plan Z is debatable. What is not debatable is the fact that we can't rewrite the story and that it is OUR story. Milton didn't change those facts either. No matter how much I hope that the woman and the man in the garden won't disobey God, they always will. That story has been written.

We must live with the tragic choices of humankind's fall from paradise. The truth is we live with this story every day as we fall ourselves over and over again.

So instead of trying to rewrite this story, let's look for truth in the story we have inherited. Prior to the woman and man eating fruit from the forbidden tree, they share the garden with the Lord God in a beautiful and an intimate way. With anthropomorphic language, the Genesis writer describes how the Lord God audibly walks through the garden in the cool "evening breeze," apparently not able to see where the man and woman hid themselves when they heard God coming. When God asks them if they have eaten from the forbidden tree, both the man and the woman are quick to cast the blame away from themselves. The man blames the woman, and in turn also blames the Lord God who he says gave the woman to be with him. The woman blames the crafty serpent. Interestingly only the serpent is silent before the Lord God, and only the serpent is "cursed" by God.

The writer of Genesis supplies much truth here about the nature and universality of human sinfulness. Sin is everywhere (even in paradise). We are all sinners. And sin damages community. Apart from the Lord God, each character in our Genesis account sins. After they sin, the woman and man hide their nakedness from the Lord God because they are ashamed. Their relationship with God has been damaged. They blame one another for their sin even though they participated in the sin together. Their relationships with one another and with the animal kingdom have suffered. According to this passage, sin isn't merely rule-breaking by an individual. The man, the woman, and the serpent are all alienated and estranged from God and from one another as a result of their sin. The damage is both vertical in their relationships with God and horizontal in their relationships with one another. By sinning, we betray both the trust and love that exists between us and God as well as between us and one another.

We depart from John's gospel today to spend six weeks with Mark. In today's gospel reading, Mark tells two stories, one essentially framing the other. While there are several things we could discuss here, in light of our Genesis passage, I want to examine what Mark's stories teach us about sin. As our passage begins, it seems many people think Jesus is out of control. Apparently people are talking about his behavior because his family has even heard reports that Jesus is "out of his mind" so they have come to "restrain him." Perhaps they are concerned about his well-being. According to the story, the crowds are so great that Jesus and the disciples can't even eat. Perhaps Jesus's family is embarrassed by what others are saying or that he is attracting so much attention. Maybe Jesus is performing exorcisms and they don't like that. Or maybe the reports they've heard have led them to believe that Jesus really is crazy. Whatever their motives, we know that they felt compelled to come do something about Jesus.

In the inner story, Mark explains that the scribes have come from Jerusalem to manage the situation as well, and these religious teachers accuse Jesus of being possessed by a demon. Jesus responds to their accusation with sharp criticism by equating their words with blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

In the conclusion to Mark's outer story, Jesus is told that his mother, brothers, and sisters are "outside" asking to see him. As he responds to the crowd around him, Jesus seems to critique his family's misdirected efforts; however, he treats them less harshly than the scribes and is perhaps trying to make a point to the people around him concerning the value of community commitment and the cost of discipleship rather than the insignificance of his family. Nevertheless, Mark suggests that Jesus believes his family acted improperly in their attempt to control his actions.

By interlacing the story of Jesus's family with the story of these religious leaders, Mark compares and contrasts their sins. Both groups thought something was wrong with Jesus and that they needed to manage him. It is possible that Jesus's family was acting in good faith with sincere hopes of helping him. They may not have recognized their actions as sinful. Sometimes it can be very difficult to distinguish between good and evil in our world, so we don't always recognize when we are sinning. While Jesus's family may have sinned by accusing Jesus unfairly, the scribes questioned the source of Jesus's power, a much more serious sin according to Jesus.

Psalm 130, probably a song of penitence sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to make a festival offering in the temple, affirms these same truths about sin. From the "depths" the psalmist begs the Lord to hear his "supplications" and reminds us that we are all sinners: "If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?" According to the psalmist, the entire human family would be separated from God if the Lord kept track of sins. The psalm also suggests that sin causes oppression within the human community.

So that you don't get too angry with me or with the compilers of the lectionary for weighing you down with all this sin talk today, let's think about the truth we can find in the rest of this psalm. It gives us great cause for hope. Sin does enslave us all at times, but according to the psalmist, God hears the sinner's voice and provides forgiveness. The psalmist speaks personally and comprehensively about the steadfast love of God mediating forgiveness and redemption for the sinner. So there is reason for great hope even in the face of all the despair sin causes. God doesn't abandon humanity even though we frequently ignore God's intentions for the world. The psalm reminds us that God's love is constant and plentiful.

The apostle Paul also imparts a great deal of hope through our epistle reading. Paul encouraged the Corinthians to "not lose heart" but to remember their eternal hope in Christ Jesus. Paul identifies the tensions of the good story of our life in Christ, tensions between the outer and the inner natures, the present and the future, the temporary and the permanent, and the seen and the unseen. He focuses on the eternal rewards of our life with Christ, yet he doesn't denigrate the value of our present story. "Day by day" the Corinthian Christians were "being renewed" and "day by day" we are "being renewed" now.

Even in their sin, the woman and man heard the footsteps and the voice of the Lord God in the garden. The rest of scripture testifies that we can still discover God's presence all around us

even in this fallen world—inside and out. Even as members of Jesus’s still-confused extended family, if we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear, we will recognize that just as we are being continually renewed from the inside out, we participate in God’s work begun with Christ Jesus to exorcise sin from our world and build a new heaven and a new earth.

We won’t completely eliminate sin from our lives or from the world and we can’t change the stories that have already been written, but we can participate in writing a good story right now and helping build a good story for the future. Like the psalmist and Paul remind us, we can live in hope because God’s steadfast love assures us of both forgiveness and redemption.