

## Jesus Messin' with our Framing Stories

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John 5:1-18

May 9, 2010

As you heard the lectionary passage read, what were you curious about? What questions did this story of healing raise in you? What surprises? I am tempted to pursue a number of curiosities.

I wonder about those others at the pool with whom the healed one lived for years and years. The scripture says that whenever he attempted to reach the healing water, someone stepped in front of him. Hmm. Was it like with crabs? When a crab, among other crabs in a net, tries to go toward freedom, climbing toward the top of the net, the other crabs, I'm told, will pull it back. Is this what happened?

Also, the question that Jesus asked intrigues me: "Do you want to be made well?" That assumes the man might have preferred the comfort of his misery to the unknowns of responsible freedom. Hmm. That sounds familiar.

And I took note that the man who was healed didn't even know Jesus by name, even after the miraculous healing. Strange, it didn't seem to matter to either one at the time. But here is where I want to focus. Does it strike you as odd that this healing was so threatening to those religious leaders that they set out, first, to persecute Jesus, and then to kill him? Think about it. Here was a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years, living by a pool with healing powers, yet unable to reach them. Now, at last, he is healed, able to live a healthy life.

Why would anyone not marvel and give thanks? Why would anyone not be amazed by such grace? What a great, hopeful story! What about that wonderful event could cause those Jewish leaders to set out to kill him? That doesn't make any sense...Or does it?



It made no sense to me, the reaction to Kevin and Steven. At the time, I was pastor of a congregation going through a long process of deciding whether or not to add a ritual of blessing of same-sex unions to our ministry—which Kevin and Steven had requested. To put it mildly, we backed into a whirlwind, a fury of condemnation coming from around the country, leading to our church being "dis-fellowshipped" on all Baptist levels—local, state, and national. And, more painfully, cherished members left in protest. All because two men wanted to commit their love to each other before God within a worship service in their home church.

How could two people loving each other stir such resistance and cause such condemnation? Can you make sense of that? Here is a way to understand this kind of reaction. You and I live out of framing stories—narratives that define us, account for our core values, and determine what we see. They provide our worldview, our outlook on the world around us.

The narrative about Sabbath keeping among faithful Jews in Jesus' day was clear: In obedience to the Torah (God's Law), there must be no work on the Sabbath, not even healing or picking up your mat. Furthermore, their framing story said that only God is to be worshipped. Even familiarity with God is blasphemy, idolatrous, the most severe violation of faith.

So here comes Jesus, messin' with their framing stories, challenging their familiar ways of looking at the world. He healed on the Sabbath, claiming that God, his "Abba" (Daddy), was working through him. John writes: "For this reason, the Jews [religious leaders] were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God" (John 5:18).

Jesus was saying, "Let's see the Sabbath and God differently." He was challenging the stories that were framing the leaders' lives. They didn't take his challenge as good news, as some did. They chose to resist, condemn, and eliminate the challenger.

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This helped me understand the vicious reaction to our congregation's inclusion of gay persons and gay unions in 1992. We were challenging two very deep framing stories: 1) homosexuality is a sin, condemned as such in scripture, a normative story for 2,000 years; 2) marriage is defined as a covenant between a man and a woman. We were redefining "family." We were offering an alternative story about human sexuality and marriage.

No wonder the visceral outrage. No wonder we were regarded as a cancer to the body, to be cut out and thrown away. We were—without knowing it—offering to replace these defining stories with new ones.



Now, let's relate this awareness to our current "becoming a peace church" conversation at Circle of Mercy. There are two basic framing stories about the way to peace (shalom): the kingdom of Caesar and the kingdom of God. One is the imperial road of coercive force, and the other the road of non-imperial, mutual power; one is the path of violent action, and the other the path of nonviolent action.

The Caesar way, both then and now, tells us that peace is achieved by force, by control. Pax Romana (or Pax Americana) is peace through domination—militarily, politically, and economically. From this worldview, violence saves; violence is redemptive. It solves problems. Anyone who uses violence is trying to solve a problem, seeking peace, trying to achieve resolution and establish order. And the way of violence, as in war, promises good things: companionship, meaning, adventure, and self-sacrifice for a larger purpose.

The Jesus way of shalom, the kingdom of God, is an alternative framing story. It says: Don't repay violence with violence, but seek creative and transforming ways of relating; don't hate your enemies or competitors, but love them, pray for them, forgive them, and do to them as you wish done to you; don't get revenge when wronged, but seek reconciliation. Seek peace, not through domination, but through mutuality and loving "the other [the neighbor] as yourself."

So, here we are, eight years into our history, trying to discern whether or not to further define ourselves, as a "peace church." To do so would not be veering away from our vision statement: to follow Jesus by doing justice, showing mercy, and walking humbly with God. I think it might "thicken" our framing story, make more specific our vision. But it doesn't fundamentally change our mission.



To claim this identity, to live more intentionally from this framing story, would be for me "costly grace."

First, grace. We are talking about a gift. This Jesus way of peace is a gift to the world. It's a hopeful alternative that I do not have trouble believing as true. Martin Luther King did not overstate the choice before us: either we choose nonviolence or non-existence. Either we learn nonviolent ways of relating in our families, friendships, national and international relationships, and with the non-human beings of creation—or we will self-destruct.

I think that Jesus and other visionaries of shalom got it right. And I am grateful to those who have helped me see this path. This is "the way, the truth, and the life full and abundant." It is grace; it is gift.

But, as we have been noting, this grace is costly. If we take this identity as peace-lovers and peacemakers, there will be push-back. There will be threat. There will be resistance both within me and from others in my world. The Jesus way of peace will be messin' with the framing story of our culture in which we live and move and have our being.

I breathe its air. I see its images. I hear its promises whispering, if not shouting, in my ears: Trust peace through domination. Trust the "trickle down" of wealth. Trust our war on terror. Trust the freedom in the right to carry handguns in public. Trust that security comes from deportation of immigrants. Trust the benefits from the sale of arms around the world. You know the litany.

Both stories about the way to peace are alive and vital within me. So, if we become a peace church as part of our identity, this means that being a person of peace becomes more centrally my identity. If we decide to deepen our life together in this way, I will need two things from the Circle.

One, I will need your help. There is no way I can adopt a nonviolent way of life without you and without God. I don't have it within me to love like that. I will need a community in which I can find the power to love my enemy, to forgive and pray for those who stand against me and my view of the world. I want support, guidance, and accountability; and I want to give support, guidance, and accountability.

An example. Just preparing this sermon made me feel accountable to you. I was thinking about those with whom I have unresolved differences. What would reconciliation—loving them—require of me?

I thought of Jim, a close friend for many years, a companion on many joint projects. I became his pastor. Then a particular stand I took brought angry judgment from the colleagues with whom he was working at the time. It put him in a hard position. He felt he had to withdraw from the church and our relationship. We had breakfast, talked around the edges, but didn't face the hurt between us. That was eighteen years ago. Because of you and this sermon, yesterday I wrote Jim, now living in Boone, asking if he would be willing to have lunch with me.

Mahatma Gandhi once said that he struggled with three enemies: the British Empire; some of the Indian people; and, most formidable, Mahatma Gandhi. If Gandhi was still working on his resistance to loving and forgiving others and himself, I sure need a place to do that work.

I would sign up tonight for a school on becoming a peacemaker, where we would explore practicing nonviolent ways of living, with a curriculum and enough time. There would be occasions to do the internal work of overcoming the ways I am violent toward and judge myself, and the external work of embodying peace work in my family, work place, and larger community. The early church, made up of small, alternative communities of nonviolence, was living within a powerful framing story of imperial violence. Required, therefore, was an extended period of schooling in the Jesus peace way before baptism. Are not we in such a countercultural stance as well? Don't we need that kind of schooling?

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The second thing I would need from the Circle: the promise not to change our name as Circle of Mercy. I am a wannabe peacemaker. I am a beginner. The older I get and the more seriously I take this commitment, the greater the distance between who I am and who I aspire to be. Maybe what matters is the intention, the desire, the longing to embrace this alternative, life-giving path. And maybe what also matters is that we keep showing up, week by week, gathering around our hunger and thirst for justice, regularly circling up to receive mercy and begin again and again and again.

Donald Rumsfeld, the former secretary of defense, once said, "We have a choice: either to change the way we live, which is unacceptable, or to change the way *they* live. We choose the latter."<sup>[1]</sup>

Not me, Donald! I choose the former, wanting to change and be transformed into a peacemaker. This is possible only within a circle of God worshipers and a circle of support, story telling, laughter, learning—and mercy...Especially mercy.

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[1] Quoted from *Everything Must Change*, by Brian D. McLaren