

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 5 JULY 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

Mark 6: 1-13

"I am a Stranger to Myself"

Stories of Winter Warmth: The duck is dead

A woman brought her sick duck, Cuddles, to a vet. As she laid her pet on the table, the vet pulled out his stethoscope and listened to the bird's chest. The vet shook his head sadly and informed her the duck has passed away.

The distressed woman wailed, "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am sure. The duck is dead," replied the vet.

"How can you be so sure?" she protested. "I mean you haven't done any testing on him or anything. He might just be in a coma or something."

The vet rolled his eyes, turned around and left the room.

He returned a few minutes later with a black Labrador Retriever. As the duck's owner looked on in amazement, the dog stood on his hind legs, put his front paws on the examination table and sniffed the duck from top to bottom. He then looked up at the vet with sad eyes and shook his head. The vet patted the dog and took it out of the room.

A few minutes later he returned with a cat. The cat jumped on the table and also delicately sniffed the bird from head to foot. The cat sat back on its haunches, shook its head, meowed softly and strolled out of the room.

The vet looked at the woman and said, "I'm sorry, but as I said, this is most definitely, 100% certifiably, a dead duck."

The vet produced a bill for \$250.

The woman cried, "\$250 just to tell me my duck is dead?"

The vet shrugged, "I'm sorry. If you had just taken my word for it, the bill would have been \$20, but with the Lab Report and the Cat Scan, it's now \$250."

1. A stranger at home

In our bible reading, the *hoi polloi*, the people of Jesus' hometown, assess Jesus by placing him on their own examination table. They sniff his life over, to use this metaphor from our humorous story.

"Where did he get this theology?

What is the source of his wisdom?

What are these deeds of power he performs with his hands?"

Like Rose and the kids in her neighbourhood when they assess their mysterious neighbour

Mr Wintergarten, in the children's story, *Rose Meets Mr Wintergarten*, the *hoi polloi* of Nazareth construct a public discourse about this stranger Jesus in their midst. They declare him a person of dubious insignificance.

Our text, once culturally understood, carries a whole arsenal of cynical disbelief, socio-economic class prejudice and presumed knowledge about Jesus and his background.

He is only a carpenter, so how could the hands of a mere worker perform acts of healing? His is named a "son of Mary", which "is contrary to Jewish custom to describe a man as the son of the mother, even when the father is no longer living, except in insulting terms" (Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel of Mark*, 299f). This term probably inferred illegitimacy, suggests Ched Myers (*Binding the Strong Man*, 212).

So the people of Jesus hometown create a discourse, a third-space between Jesus and themselves. They place Jesus into that space. They create his identity and place him into their story. The people make him a stranger in his home! We learn about God in the life of Jesus: we learn that we can make human being strangers to one another, and we close ourselves off to God's mysterious healing and changing power in our community.

2. I am a stranger to myself

Our story tells us that the effects of the power of that discourse, constructed by the people, was immense! Jesus was ineffectual, unable to create any form of well-being. Jesus was surprised and astonished.

This is one of the boldest statements about Jesus powerlessness in the Gospels. Luke leaves this part out in his version of this story. Matthew rewords and softens it, saying Jesus did not do many mighty works there.

How can we make sense of this power of constructed discourse, a power productive of intolerance, constructing negative patterns of identity formation and developing community animosity, of this fear of what does not fit into our meaning system?

The French psychoanalyst and interpreter of Freud, Jacques Lacan, has offered some profound insights to these patterns from his work with people.

Individuals and communities, he suggests, can at times create and identify with a **master discourse, a symbolic discourse**, about themselves and others. A master discourse states who **the other** is. In fact, we all actually live within such structured symbolic discourses like master discourses, life-worlds informing us what it is to be a male or female, to be a young or old person, to be a worker, mother, daughter, successful or a failure, and so on. We measure ourselves and others by such meaning systems!

The *hoi polloi* in our story presume to know all about Jesus, they are the masters who create this discourse and fit Jesus into a Procrustean mould. "In Greek legend", writes John O'Donohue, "Procrustes was a robber who stretched victims until they fitted the length of the bed". (*Eternal Echoes: Exploring the hunger to belong*, 145)

However, what the creators of a master discourse do not realise is that they are incomplete themselves. There are truths they repress, truths about their fears, anxieties and desires that motivate their constructions and behaviour. In this way, they are strangers to

themselves. In fact, the truth about my being is that “I am a stranger to myself!”

Now this is an uncomfortable and anxiety-producing notion. We want to be in control. In our Western society, we work hard to create safe, known, pleasing and self-enclosed worlds. We collude with the media and create master-knowledge about others: eg, about Indigenous people, asylum seekers, former offenders, people with varied mental health challenges.

Lacan taught that redemption from this discourse involved learning and discovering that individuals and communities are actually divided subjects, and constructed in certain ways and thus alienated from other aspects. Redemption then meant re-inventing one’s self in new forms of language, experiences and values.

3. At home among strangers

How does Jesus respond to being contaminated and contained by this intolerant and cynical presumed knowledge?

He does not react, he learns! He gains wisdom about humanity’s destructive capacities! Yet, this new learning produces new outcomes. Jesus sends his followers into the community to learn to be *at home among strangers* (Ched Myers, 213).

They are sent to into the community, as Ched Myers writes, “in utter dependence ... upon hospitality. ...They, like Jesus who has just been renounced in his own “home”, are to take on the status of a sojourner in the land” (213).

Mission is about an engagement with the community in an ethic of trust and generosity. The disciples come to share their message of God’s nearness and practice of holistic healing and are open to receive hospitality from the people they meet. Yet, on the basis of his experience of his home town, Jesus also offers his followers a strategy to face hostility and offensive treatment. In this meeting the stranger in themselves meets the stranger in the other, and both are enriched.

4. Among strangers we can build a new home

In the film, *The Visitor*, we meet Walter Vale, played by Richards Jenkins from the series *Six Feet Under*, a professor of economics at Connecticut College who is in his early 60s and is deeply stuck in his own master discourse. A widower, writes A O Scott of the New York Times,

“he plods through an existence that looks comfortable and easy enough, but also profoundly tedious. He recycles old syllabuses and lecture notes for his classes, and suffers through piano lessons in a half-hearted effort to sustain some kind of connection to his wife, who was a classical concert pianist.”

Professor as Student of His Life and Others’, April 11, 2008
<http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/04/11/movies>

His life enters a period of gradual change when he forces himself to alter his routine and travel to New York to present a paper at a conference. When he arrives at his Manhattan apartment that he keeps but rarely visits, he finds two young people squatting there. Initially irritated at their presence, he invites them to stay. Tarek is a drummer from Syria and Zainab is his Senegalese girlfriend, and they are illegal residents due to a range of events beyond

their control.

What the film presents is the way each of the characters visits the life of the other, and they meet the stranger in themselves and the stranger in the other.

For example, Walter had felt he failed in his musical passions and had stopped his piano lessons. Yet, he is able to re-invent himself when he discovers his passion for the African drums, which he learns from Tarek's playing and teaching. Then, when the police arrest and deport Tarek without dignity or respect, Walter's compassion and spirit of justice is born as he confronts systemic injustice. Tarek in turn, in despair and alone in a detention centre, is deeply moved and sustained by Walter's daily visits and commitment to Tarek's mother and girlfriend.

This film invites us to witness an alternative use of power for the common good, a power unlike the master discourse Jesus faced in his religious hometown. This film shares the hard yet beautiful story about inner transformation and an active ethic of hospitality brought about by a shy, unselfish engagement with other people. From our faith perspective we can say God works where ever people work together for the full well-being of all.