

Here Is A Real Mystery

Everybody loves a good story.

Over thirty years ago I heard Frederick Buechner, one of my very favorite authors, give a series of lectures. These lectures were essentially his biography put into theological language. All good theology is likely autobiographical.

(Buechner published this under the title "The Sacred Journey" and it is a very good book to use in your daily practice. In it, among other things, he tells how his young life was significantly affected by his father's suicide.)

Buechner says that if you went to a really smart philosopher and started asking questions seeking for the truth, you would likely get, at least in the beginning, learned and sophisticated answers. At the end of each answer you got, if you asked, "Yes, but why is that true?" you'd get, perhaps, another learned and sophisticated answer.

If, however, you kept this up and if the philosopher were really smart, at some point he or she would remove their glasses, push all the scholarly books and papers aside and say, "Once upon a time . . ." and, then, this person would tell a story.

Jesus was a master story teller and when he told stories he didn't take them from the Jewish Bible of his time. Rather, he took them from the everyday experiences of the cultural life around him.

"A shepherd had a hundred sheep and one got lost."

"A man was on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell among thieves. Who do you think was neighbor to him?"

"A Pharisee and a Publican went up to the temple to pray."

"A certain man had two sons."

Everybody loves a good story. Even if we have heard it before, we want to hear it again.

Fulton Ousler wrote a book, one of the best-selling books of all time. It was about the life of Jesus. He called it, "The Greatest Story Ever Told." Ousler was following in the steps of the disciples of Jesus who themselves told stories about Jesus.

We have been dealing with one in going through day-by-day the last week in the life of Jesus as told by Mark.

Not only does everybody love a good story but also everybody loves a good mystery. We like to be kept on the edges of our seats eager, and sometimes frightened, to find out what is coming next.

We are about to enter into a part of the Jesus story that is a mystery unlike most any other that we encounter.

In Christian theological lingo it is called "The Paschal Mystery."

(If you want to see what Wikipedia has to say about it - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paschal_mystery)

Unlike an Agatha Christie mystery where, in the end we not only find out who did it but also where all the

pieces fall into place, in this story we are left with something we cannot understand or know. This is a true mystery.

One of the dilemmas anyone who tries to talk or teach about this mystery has is that we are limited to dualistic language to talk about a non-dual or unitive mind matter. A person can know about unitive mind at the non-dual mind level but it can, I am convinced, only be experienced through some sort of non-dual modality such as a spiritual practice, a ritual that produces an altered state of consciousness, nature or some form of art.

I have relied on many great teachers to help me in my own understanding of this.

One of the first was a teacher whose name is lost to me now. He gave a lecture that let me know there was way more to life and living than just that which could be apprehended at the information level. In his lecture he quoted a passage from Naomi White. These are words that she wrote. They appeared in a publication called "Progressive Education" in 1943.

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I have taught in high school for ten years. During that time I have given assignments, among others, to a murderer, a pugilist, a thief and an imbecile. The murderer was a quiet little boy who sat on the front seat and regarded me with pale blue eyes; the pugilist lounged by the window and let loose at intervals in a raucous laugh that startled even the geraniums; the thief was a gay-hearted Lothario with a song on his lips; and the imbecile, a shifty-eyed little animal seeking the shadows.

The murderer awaits death in the state penitentiary; the pugilist lost an eye in a brawl; the thief, by standing on tiptoe can see the window of my room from the county jail; and the once gentle eyed little moron beats his head against a padded wall in the state asylum.

All these pupils once sat in my room, sat and looked at me gravely across worn brown desks. I must have been a great help to those pupils. I taught them the rhyming scheme of the Elizabethan sonnet and how to diagram a complex sentence.

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There is way more to life than what we are taught at the normative cultural or what is called the "conventional wisdom" level.

The dualistic/non-dual dilemma is just one of the difficulties facing us as we move deeper into what in Christian tradition is called "the last week." There are many others. The "Jesus died for your sins" business is one. I'll have some words to say about this later today and more words later in the series.

It is true that there is likely no aspect of the Christian story, however understood, that has inspired as much art as this story. We could easily fill a year of Sundays just showing photographs of the great paintings and sculptures that this story has inspired all the while using as a backdrop listening to some of the great music that this story has inspired.

Another major block to hearing this story correctly are things like how the story has been used to create feelings of guilt in people. It has been used to stir anger in people as well as scapegoating. The

misunderstanding of this story has been one of the major contributions to a misunderstanding about the nature of that Mystery that is pointed to by the word "God." I could go on.

This mystery is to do none of those things. It is not to create in us admiration, sympathy, guilt, or fear. This "mystery story" is to create in those who enter into it empowerment, love, joy and true freedom. How do we make the passage into unitive life? That is what this story is about.

As I said last week, for many people this day in the last week is the beginning of Easter. I'm not going to read all of the verses having to do with this day. It began with Jesus sharing a last supper with his disciples. It was a meal, you remember, that had and has a multitude of meanings.

After the meal Jesus goes into the Garden to pray. I will read to you, using Eugene Peterson's translation, this part of the story and narrate the rest. This day ends on Friday morning with the crucifixion.

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They came to an area called Gethsemane. Jesus told his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James, and John with him. He plunged into a sinkhole of dreadful agony. He told them, "I feel bad enough right now to die. Stay here and keep vigil with me."

Going a little ahead, he fell to the ground and prayed for a way out: "Papa, Father, you can - can't you? - get me out of this. Take this cup away from me. But please, not what I want - what do you want?"

He came back and found them sound asleep. He said to Peter, "Simon, you went to sleep on me? Can't you stick it out with me a single hour? Stay alert, be in prayer, so you don't enter the danger zone without even knowing it. Don't be naive. Part of you is eager, ready for anything in God; but another part is as lazy as an old dog sleeping by the fire."

He then went back and prayed the same prayer. Returning, he again found them sound asleep. They simply couldn't keep their eyes open, and they didn't have a plausible excuse.

He came back a third time and said, "Are you going to sleep all night? No - you've slept long enough. Time's up. The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up. Let's get going. My betrayer has arrived."

No sooner were the words out of his mouth when Judas, the one out of the Twelve, showed up, and with him a gang of ruffians, sent by the high priests, religion scholars, and leaders, brandishing swords and clubs. The betrayer had worked out a signal with them: "The one I kiss, that's the one - seize him. Make sure he doesn't get away."

He went straight to Jesus and said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. The others grabbed him and roughed him up. One of the men standing there unsheathed his sword, swung, and came down on the Chief Priest's servant, lopping off the man's ear.

Jesus said to them, "What is this, coming after me with swords and clubs as if I were a dangerous criminal? Day after day I've been sitting in the Temple teaching, and you never so much as lifted a hand against me. What you

in fact have done is confirm the prophetic writings."
All the disciples cut and ran.

A young man was following along. All he had on was a
bedsheet. Some of the men grabbed him but he got away,
running off naked, leaving them holding the sheet.

(Mark 14:32-52)

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Like everybody in this room, I inherited a view of and
belief about the Bible. I even think there was a period
of time in my life when I wanted, or perhaps
psychologically needed, the Bible to be literally true.
I just couldn't make it work for me.

I've mentioned to you before: I am so lucky and
grateful. I've had such wonderful teachers.

My first year in seminary I had a professor who did an
"object lesson." I want to reproduce it.

I need two people to serve as readers and one person to
serve as time keeper. The time keeper needs to have a
stop-watch on your device.

Here is what I want you to do:

One of you is going to be Jesus and one of you is going
to be a Pharisee whose name is Nicodemous. I'll be the
narrator. We are going to put on a little, and I hope
interesting, play.

* * *

Narrator: There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. Late one night he visited Jesus and said,

Nicodemus: "Rabbi, we all know you're a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren't in on it."

Jesus: "You're absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it's not possible to see what I'm pointing to - to God's kingdom."

Nicodemus: "How can anyone be born who has already been born and grown up? You can't re-enter your mother's womb and be born again. What are you saying with this 'born-from-above' talk?"

Jesus: "You're not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation - the 'wind hovering over the water' creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into new life - it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. When you look at a baby, it's just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can't see and touch - the Spirit - and becomes a living spirit.

"So don't be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be 'born from above' - out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone 'born from above' by the wind of God, the Spirit of God."

Nicodemus: "What do you mean by this? How does this happen?"

Jesus: "You're a respected teacher of Israel and you don't know these basics? Listen carefully. I'm speaking the truth to you. I speak only of what I know by experience; I give witness only to what I have seen with my own eyes. There is nothing secondhand here, no hearsay. Yet instead of facing the evidence and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions. If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don't believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can't see, the things of God?"

"No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man. In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up - and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.

"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, tell the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.

"This is the crisis we are in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and

illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is."

Narrator: After this conversation, Jesus went on with his disciples into the Judean countryside and relaxed with them there.

* * *

Okay, how long did that take? (Just a little over four minutes.)

That's the first question my professor asked.

Then he got us to thinking: who was there besides Jesus and Nicodemus? So who reported this? This was years before the Jesus Seminar. So, the entire year we went through the Jesus story raising these sorts of questions.

By the way, this was the first teacher who taught me the line I've used in here numerous times: "Jesus told parables. His followers told parables about Jesus."

At the end of the passage we read earlier about the experience in the Garden all the disciples run away. Every single one of them. They are not seen again until Easter. So who is the reporter of all this? The earliest account that we have of this was not written until nearly forty years after it occurred.

I tell you this not to debunk or belittle. Quite the contrary! I do it to remind us all that we are dealing with a story that not only did not factually happen but also that is truer than true. I did not just say that there was not a Jesus or that he was not crucified.

Those facts are pretty well established. I am saying that the stories told about those facts are stories that various aspects of those who chose to follow Jesus through death to life held as transformational to them.

So, let's look at the story of this night and then how this story might be relevant for us when we get up and go to work tomorrow - after, of course, we've done our daily spiritual practice.

Let's begin with the fact that in the story Jesus says, "You are all going to betray and/or leave me." And, we respond, "No sir! Not I sir!"

"Stay with me while I pray."

And we all go to sleep.

What fabulous metaphors!

When Jesus goes into the Garden to pray - again, there is no one with him - the prayer is, as Borg and Crossan say, remarkable both for its content and the way Jesus addresses God.

Jesus calls God, "Daddy." The scholars say this word reflects the intimate relationship Jesus had with Sacred Mystery.

When Jesus prays the words "Not my will but thy will be done" it does not mean that his death was the will or plan of God. People who die for just causes do in fact "hand themselves over." The example Borg and Crossan use is that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, who was hanged because of his involvement in a plot to assassinate Hitler. This is not a prayer of weak resignation but, rather, a trusting of God in spite of dire circumstances.

My task was to offer the "opening words" in the worship liturgy in the cathedral across the plaza today. Among other things I said, "Easter faith knows that the broken can be repaired, the meaningless can be understood, the wounded can be healed and that even that which is dead in us can be raised to new life." This is the kind of faith we see in Jesus.

Judas arrived with a contingent of temple police and soldiers and he identifies Jesus with a kiss. These people sent by the temple authorities would not necessarily know Jesus. This is why he had to be identified.

Mark reports that one of Jesus' disciples draws his sword and hacks off the ear of a slave of one of the high priests. At least one of Jesus' followers was armed. Jesus immediately disavows the action and you can interpret this as an example of failed discipleship or the solid teaching of Jesus about pacifism.

If you read the story of this garden experience in John it is like reading another story entirely. Mark's emphasis is, again, about failed discipleship. Judas betrays Jesus. Peter denies Jesus. The rest of the disciples flee. As I said, they are gone for the rest of the story. They don't reappear until Easter.

The fact that none of them are there is what has led the scholars to conclude that this part of the story is what they call a "post-Easter Christian construction and not history remembered." Mark was written 40 or 50 years after the event. The different gospels tell it different ways. We don't know what the history was.

Some legal or quasi-legal process was gone through that was designed to get rid of Jesus. They weren't trying

to get rid of him because he had claimed to be the Messiah. They wanted him silenced because of his teachings that challenged the system of domination and injustice.

In the years 66 to 75 or so many people who were followers of Jesus had undergone lethal persecution. Mark was written as an educational tool and for liturgical purposes. That was why he was warning people, "Be careful. These are tough times. These are times when there can be betrayals and denials.

Martin Niemoller was a German pastor (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_they_came...) who came to oppose Hitler and because of that was put in a concentration camp. He was released by the Allies in 1945. He became a very clear and powerful voice for penance and reconciliation. He wrote some words that have been variously reported about the dangers of political apathy. They are:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out - Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out - Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out - Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me - and there was no one left to speak for me.

Mark's story - this is not history! - offers to these persecuted Christians consolation.

First, he applauds those who imitated Jesus and lived with courage.

Second, those who imitated Peter are consoled with the hope of repentance and forgiveness.

Third, according to Mark the worst sin against Jesus is neither denial or betrayal but despair, the loss of faith.

After today we will have only two times when we will meet before Easter. We will not meet Easter Sunday. So, next week we begin to deal with what is, in the tradition, call "Good Friday."

I know that several of you now receive the daily e-mails sent out by the Center for Action and Contemplation, Richard Rohr's organization. Those of you who do receive these know that for days now Rohr has been revisiting the issue of dualistic versus non-dual or unitive mind matters.

As I said at the beginning of today, we are condemned to talk about theology dualistically but we can't experience it that way. You can't use logic to explore and experience a mystery. We are trained in this culture to be uncomfortable if we step outside the realm of logic.

There are people who believe that they can use logic or dualist thinking to define God. It is arrogant idolatry to think that anyone, using the limited human brain, can embrace much less articulate the mystery that is pointed to by the word "God." What this has led to is a belief that "God" is a "being" that is off out there somewhere and is equipped with supernatural power and actually directs the lives of a few lucky people. This view of God is called "theism." And should this view of God become inadequate the only alternative is "a-theism."

I am not a theist. Nor am I an atheist. I can reject theism without rejecting the God of Jesus. I hope you can as well.

Though I am going to deal with this more in the next two weeks, atonement theology - in my opinion - is not only wrong but also dreadful. Atonement theology is based on the myth that once humans lived in a perfect state and we fell from that into sin and this so upset God that the only way we could make it back into God's favor was for God to have Jesus executed and if we would just believe that, then things would be "okeydokey". There was no "original perfection" to start with so no need for divine intervention to save sinners.

I do believe that there is a Mystery, a presence and a power that leads to expanded life, expanded love and expanded being, and even the experience of an expanded consciousness.

Though Richard Rohr has said this in one of those recent e-mails I mentioned, I first heard him say it many years ago: You know how I have suggested that we stop using the word "God" and start using the phrase "Sacred Mystery" which we do not and cannot comprehend at the dualistic mind level? Well, Rohr suggests that we stop using the word "sin" and, rather, in its place use the word "separation." Sin is the condition, and the behaviors that come forth from this condition, of being separated from Sacred Mystery.

Of course, we have to use dualistic thinking to function in the world. It is useless when it comes to living in the Heart of Sacred Mystery. One of the reasons all wise and useful spiritual teachers begin their teachings with some form of "don't judge" is because that is where we spend most of our time -

judging. Just notice your own process. So much of our time is spent making judgments about good/bad, in/out, for/again, right/wrong which lead us into the realms of racism, sexism, homophobia and religious imperialism we enjoy today.

I'm going to quote Rohr: "At the risk of being too cleverly alliterative, here is the normal sequencing of the dualistic mind: it compares, it competes, it conflicts, it conspires, it condemns, it cancels out any contrary evidence, and then it crucifies with impunity. This is the source of most violence, which is invariably sacralized as good and necessary to "make the world safe for democracy" or to "save souls for heaven."

These are the things you see played out in this story of the last week. If we can step into the mystery of it we can hear Jesus says, "There is another way. Come, follow me. And, don't be afraid."

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.