

Lent 3 John 2: 13-25

Stories. Stories help us understand ourselves. True stories, quest stories, love stories (which interest me), revenge stories. Scary stories. Sublime stories. Secret stories. In Lent we prepare to hear anew the one great story, the passion and its sequel. We must prepare if we are to hear it clear and deep. It is a complex story with many characters. It is our story, deeply personal, with many plots: quest, love, failure, secrets. It is the ultimate human story. Though unworthy, I identify with the minor characters: the believing centurion, wordless Simon of Cyrene, the Via Dolorosa women, the alabaster jar woman “doing what she could,” the man, possibly evangelist Mark himself, eavesdropping in Gethsemane and escaping naked from the soldiers. A secret story.

The torturing of Jesus is a scary story. Violent like Parkland, Orlando, Las Vegas, Charleston, Sandy Hook. It connects to the ugliness of our culture. Our culture, which shapes and affects us no matter how hard we resist.

Resurrection, both *beyond* and *within* the crucifixion, is a sublime story. We think it a happy, glorious, and comforting resolution. But it overturns our expectations, as violently as Jesus overturns the temple tables, leaving us trembling, doubtful, unable to appropriate it. In the original ending of Mark, which is really a Passion story with a long, secret-filled introduction, the women *run frightened* from the empty tomb, like Mark runs frightened from Gethsemane. They are silent and paralyzed. We should not paper over this jaggedness too quickly.

St Benedict, patron of monastic life, encourages us to listen to stories, especially in Lent. The life of a monk (as we too often hear) should be a perpetual Lent. Such strictness appeals to some temperaments, ascetic types: I suppose rigorists will compete with one another. Do they overlook the goal of these negative practices--which is to prepare for holy Easter with intense and joyful desire? To me (not ascetical), a more congenial Benedictine Lenten practice is that each monk receives a Lenten book, and reads it cover to cover. In today's world, the book is no longer assigned; we must find it. Sometimes a book finds us when the time is ripe.

On Ash Wednesday the public library made available a book I had requested. Published last year by Elizabeth Strout, who writes about small-town life in Maine. Her books have people I really know; she tells their stories, reveals their secrets. Sometimes her characters *are* me; sometimes they are *you*. Wanting to know *you* in your most private places, and partly able to look at myself, I find her books irresistible.

A secular fiction book is not what *St Benedict* had in mind, though I hope he'd recognize spiritual truth however it comes. At any rate, the book found me and I was enthralled. I annoyed uninterested friends, demanding they listen to excerpts. The book's first character, like St Paul, hears the voice of God in a crisis, but, unlike him, over time becomes uncertain what God means. But it was the second character, Patty, who obsessed me.

Mid-fifties, lonely, a widow, doing her best as a high-school guidance counselor, Patty is a good, decent person—more like you than me. One day a difficult student says something to Patty. The student doesn't realize her words go to the bone. They happen to be true.

A brother-monk did this to me. Told a joke, teasing, to show off. Ha-ha, we said. The joke trespassed on my private territory. I was too proud to protest. I said nothing; comedian and world moved on. But, I remember; I did not move on. Possibly this is material for my private Lenten work.

A similar experience. I told Patty's story in a homily for some sisters. I did it badly. I learned how badly. Sister Matilda said, “I read that book and hated it. I loathe every book that woman writes.” As if to say, “How *could* you think it fine?” Her words pierced me like the centurion's

spear. Sister Judy said, “I tell you this as a friend, Gabriel. Don’t tell that story at the abbey. They won’t get it; *I* didn’t get it.” Other sisters passed sheepishly by. The smile froze on my face. I began to sweat, saying “Thank you for the feedback.” Inwardly I cursed my stupidity. Back home, paralyzed, mid-day, I crawled under the bedcovers with my shame.

Was this, at a much lower level, the humiliation traitor Judas or denying Peter felt in their moments of self-awareness? Was this, at a lower level, how Jesus felt when, sharing the messianic secret, his listeners repeatedly, in Sister Judy’s words, “did not get it”?

Occasionally we are given moments of truth, which we’d rather not have. We do not understand, we don’t know how to use them. Learning that photos in the guidance office show nephews and nieces, not offspring, the student speculates on Patty’s private life. “You never *got* any, did you, your husband couldn’t *do it*.” Patty’s marriage had been deeply loving; she missed her late husband intensely. But the words had enough truth to trigger an NRA assault weapon. “Leave this office immediately.” Then four hateful accusatory words for good measure. Like hate-speech written on facebook, like hate speech shouted or Pilate’s pavement.

You can see why Sister Matilda, a lifelong teacher, disliked this story. Students push your buttons; they get under your skin. You must be the adult, you have the skills, but when they send you over the edge, they must be punished. Otherwise, chaos.

Elizabeth Strout follows Patty through the weekend. We see her private places and secret memories. The student returns on Monday morning. She says, “I *bet* you want an apology.” Patty answers, “No, I do not. I want to ask you to receive mine. I called you trash, and, my dear, I was so, so wrong.” How hard it is to say, I was wrong, how hard it is, harder than bestowing pardon graciously from above. The student feels confused and frightened; she *expects* unkindness. She is like the women blinking and blinded by the sunlight outside the empty tomb. In this moment of reconciliation, the story becomes sublime. Sublime for Patty who humbles herself, for the student exalted, maybe even at a much higher level. What we do one-to-one does affect the precarious balance of the universe. Our failures contribute to the global dysfunction we feebly protest. Our constructive interactions fertilize soil for the planting of kingdom seed. No wonder Sister Judy didn’t get it. Who could? Who could think such a reversal possible, that a tender word could overcome the strength of hateful insult? Who could think ugliness and beauty are mysteriously intertwined in the human dilemma? Who could think that Jesus *had to* go to the cross in order to enter his glory? Without that horror we could not share?

It is frustrating and humiliating, for me, to grope for words to say this; frustrating and humiliating, for you, to see past a speaker who bores or annoys, and hear it. But in our failed attempts and incomprehension, with Patty and Judy and Matilda, we must keep trying. Let us pray for each other this Lent. Let us believe that prayer, the highest form of love, really accomplishes something. Let us pray for our disintegrating world. Let us pray for the students of Parkland. Let us beg for guidance counselors like Patty, in school and adult life, who heal enemies by turning the other cheek. Let us listen to God’s stories, terrifying and glorious, allow them into the secret places of our hearts. In the words of St Benedict, let us prepare for holy Easter with intensity, joy, and desire.

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