

NORMAN ROCKWELL LIED TO US

The Reverend Anne F. C. Richards
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We are again reading the gospel of Mark in this new church year, and it's worth remembering that Mark was a great artist, not the least because he pictures Jesus as a completely new beginning for the human race. That's why he begins his gospel with the words "In the beginning." Remind you of anything? The first words of the whole Bible, in Genesis: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."

Mark's gospel begins with these words: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God." So Mark positions Jesus as not only the inheritor of God's work of good creation, good life, but also as its prime mover. And I want to suggest to you that this new start applies not only to salvation history, but to each of our histories. That Jesus comes to give good news not only to the people of God corporately, but to the persons of God – you and me.

Whenever hear this gospel about John the Baptist, we think about sinfulness as well as repentance and forgiveness, but I think the emphasis is usually on sinfulness. We give the forgiveness stuff to Jesus. And so we never really connect John and Jesus in a way that I think the gospel wants us to.

Something one of my nieces said to me recently made me think about this. Her name

is Sue, and she and her husband have twin boys. On the boys' third birthday last month, Sue wrote them a letter – meant for them to read when they are older - telling them how much she loves them, and how deeply moved she is by their love for each other. Recalling their time together in her womb, she wrote: "Before you knew anyone else, you knew each other."

And immediately I thought of John the Baptist and Jesus. Remember the story about them in Luke, when Mary (newly pregnant) goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is six months pregnant with John the Baptist? As they approach each other to embrace, John leaps up in Elizabeth's womb because even though neither of them has been born yet, John recognizes Jesus. John and Jesus know each other long before they know anyone else. And so repentance and forgiveness are intimate friends. The first (repentance) is not the quid pro quo for the other (forgiveness), as if it were some kind of transaction, though we often conceive of it like that.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. What I love about John the Baptist is that he is straight up about the fact that life is difficult and that our lives don't work, not completely at least. You wouldn't be here today if you didn't have some sense of that. Life is difficult and our lives don't work. Often on Sunday afternoons after preaching, I think about the great divide that separates the preacher from the congregation. The Bishop or Fr. Peter or Josh

or I can get up here and offer some words about God and living with God and each other, and you are all incredibly gracious in your reception of what we say, but as I look out at all of you I know that your lives are essentially mysteries to us, your clergy, as ours are to you. Unfathomable mysteries. I can see it on your faces...the struggle, the integrity, the love, the sorrow, the loss, the loneliness, the fear and the joy too, the hope, the secrets, the burden of the past and the uncertainty about what lies ahead. All of what the poet Anne Sexton calls” the great rowing toward God.”

And so in a sense the gospel of Mark begins with us, here today. Life is difficult, and our lives don't work. And like the crowds who went to John for some kind of solution, we come here, to each other and to God, for some kind of meaning, some kind of assurance that this immense struggle means something, that life itself might be forgiving, and that our lives might even give birth to something.

John is a wise man. He knows that he lives within a broken spiritual system based on the past. He knows he offers only a temporary fix to a permanent problem. His baptism of repentance (based on the law) is only a forerunner of another, greater baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And the baptism of the Holy Spirit is about something completely new. It's about the wind of God sweeping over the face of the waters. And that's why next week's gospel will follow right on from this one and we will see Jesus baptized in the river Jordan. Whereas at the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, the past (in the figure of John) leaps up to anoint Jesus, now at the baptism, the future (in the Holy Spirit) leaps down to anoint him. All of time comes together in these moments of love and affirmation – which were of course repeated at each of our own baptisms.

I am realizing that all this about the past, the present, and the future sounds kind of abstract. But I think it's really important, because how we understand time is essential to whether or not we can move forward spiritually into the abundant life that Jesus was born and died to give us.

Think about it. We each have a narrative we tell ourselves about our lives, a story. When we tell our story to ourselves or to others, usually we begin at the beginning and then follow the story line until we get to the present moment, with the future ahead of us as a kind of blank page, and with our past rolling out behind us like a long unwound scroll.

The problem with this way of understanding time and the way we live with time is that it can keep us stuck in the past or in a certain way of understanding or appropriating the past as determinative. We all know the divorced person who though it has been many years since the divorce, has confected a self-understanding based completely upon having been done wrong. It colors the way he lives his life, the way he connects (or doesn't connect with) women; the way he raises his kids, and the way he meets life, usually as a battle.

You can do the same thing with how you hold within yourself your relationship with your parents. Perhaps they didn't give you enough love and respect; they failed you in major ways. It's sad, it's damaging. But: Welcome to life. This is the human condition (or, as the Bible calls it, original sin). None of us – not one, in the history of the human race – has ever received the love and respect we deserve as made in the image of God. We don't give it to others, either. But if your story stays stuck in your grievance about this lack in your life, you might as well still be that hurting 10-year-old girl, mourning her Dad's remoteness and rejection. Don't kid yourself: This will shape the rest of your life. It will cause you to look at life in terms of what it lacks. And it can

make you so protective of your own kids, so afraid that they too will be hurt in some way, that you will never give them enough room really to grow. You will parent them out of your own childhood, rather than out of your adulthood, since you yourself have not really grown up. They'll be like little pot-bound plants – all so you can manage your fear of life.

This way of looking at time - as a kind of script that essentially creates our character and spells out our futures - is damaging for all of our kids. In a highly competitive academic and social culture such as ours, we convey very strongly to our kids – sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly - that *every step in time is crucially important*. That anything they do may make them or break them. Every test, every exam, every game, every extracurricular, every connection – they all matter. A lot. This means kids can never relax. They can never just be still long enough to find out who they are. Maybe one of the reasons our high school kids here in town are using drugs is that it's their way of telling us that this system is breaking them.

No kid wants to be bad. Not one. But sometimes if the pressure is too great, a kid breaks down for awhile by doing something “bad.” And ironically, once they do that, once they “fail” in that way or some other way like not getting good enough grades or making the travel team or getting the lead in the musical, then that “failure” essentially finishes them off, at least in the way they understand themselves. When a kid gets in trouble, and lots of good kids get into trouble sometimes, it's all too easy for them to be filled with a paralyzing shame that dreadfully impacts their sense of their own worth and their future – because they believe that they have screwed up their story. Their past will always be there, defining them. They will be trapped within the law. This is why so many young people's sense of the future is so foreshortened. Why what lies ahead seems kind of a blank.

This way of living is ultimately dangerous for all of us, including the elderly. There's a lot being written about the depression and loneliness of seniors – but you know, I don't think it's all physiological. I don't think it's just because our seniors are having to cope with the breakdown of their bodies. I think it's because our seniors have lived within a cultural and spiritual context in which being old no longer means being wise just by virtue of having lived, and sharing that wisdom with others, a time of growing closer to God because that final union is coming closer, but of having less worth in others' eyes because beauty and strength and perfect health and earning power are no longer theirs. And so to be old feels like a kind of failure in which the past is right over your shoulder with regrets and guilt and the future looms up with fear. And if you feel you're not really worth much, the prospect of death is scary. Which makes the present a pretty hollow place, a place where as an older person you just put one foot in front of the other until (as one person put it to me this week) the bell chimes 5pm and you can start swimming into your first martini of the evening. A number of years ago a friend of mine who was not getting any younger and who had just gone through both the loss of his job and a divorce said to me, “Norman Rockwell lied to us.” Living with this conviction of having been gypped or robbed is a tragic way to end your life.

The form of confession we use at the 8am service has some great language in it: “Have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us, most merciful Father; for thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake, forgive us all that is past; and grant that we may ever hereafter serve and please thee in newness of life.” Notice it doesn't say “Forgive us all the bad things we have done in the past.” It's much broader: “Forgive us *all that is past*”; which I think means “Forgive us even our understanding of the past” - and maybe even our understanding of God.

This is the dilemma that John the Baptist recognized: that although we are human enough to recognize our need for forgiveness and our need to leave the past behind, we are condemned by our failure to stand outside our systems of fear and assessment and judgment so that we can receive forgiveness, so that the future can be open – that is, so future can be actually real. So that the future can come to us in the present, as it did at Jesus' baptism. When we can let the future come to us as an open thing, it re-creates the past. It baptizes it. It gives it new life. It gives us room to breathe.

God is always trying to come to us the way he did to Jesus at his baptism – from the outside, in love and affirmation. God doesn't care about the past the way we do. God is not stuck inside our stories or our culture or even our religion. And as today's epistle says, God's got the patience of a saint. God's got all the time in the world, and (as St Paul says) that very patience *is* salvation. What God does care about is the future. And about you.

I loved one of the things Josh said in his sermon last week. He said, "Christianity is a new way of being human." And it works! If people really understood this, we'd be packed to the gills. Christianity is a new way of being human, because being a Christian means *letting God help you shape a forgiving way of life*. A life that doesn't trap anyone in expectations that no human being can meet; a life that lets go of the people who have hurt us; a life that lets us forgive ourselves for our own crimes; a life that doesn't dictate who you must be or do or get. A life that forgives the past so that the future that *is* God can stream into us and make the present - this very moment - a good and sufficient place to be.

And so my friend was right: Norman Rockwell lied to us. There is no perfect

picture. There is no script. There is no program. There is only God.

The great Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote a story called "Legend" about Cain and Abel. As you know, Cain and Abel were the first offspring of the first humans in the creation myth, and Cain killed Abel – he struck him on the head with a stone out in a field - because he was jealous of what he perceived to be God's preference for Abel, making murder the first act of human culture. The rest of the Bible is in some sense a follow-up and commentary on this story and on God's determination to fix all the unredeemed pain that followed that murder, culminating of course in the sending of Jesus, whom even murder could not murder. I want to close by reading a few lines from this story, in which Borges imagines what happens after Abel's death:

"Cain and Abel came upon each other after Abel's death. They were walking through the desert and they recognized each other from afar, since both men were very tall. The two brothers sat on the ground, made a fire, and ate. They sat silently, as weary people do when the dark begins to fall. In the sky, a star glimmered, though it had not yet been given a name. In the light of the fire, Cain saw that Abel's forehead bore the mark of the stone, and he dropped the bread he was about to carry to his mouth, and asked his brother to forgive him.

'Was it you that killed me, or did I kill you?' Abel answered. 'I don't remember anymore; here we are together, like before.'

'Now I know that you have truly forgiven me,' Cain said, 'because forgetting is forgiving. I, too, will try to forget.'"

My friends, here we are together. There is no perfect picture. There is no script. There is no program. There is only God...and a new way of being human.

Amen.