

Practicing Resurrection
I Have Come to Disrupt Your Patterns
Matthew 5:17-20

I watched a movie last week that I'd never even heard of until recently. *Tanna*. It's an Australian film that was nominated for an Oscar in 2017 in the foreign film category. The story takes place on a remote South Pacific island that's populated by warring indigenous tribes. For generations, the way those tribes kept an uneasy peace with one another was through arranged marriages. When (not if, but when) one tribe harmed the other—by killing a warrior, for example, or stealing crops--it would make amends, avoid all-out war, by offering something else of value instead: the daughter of a chief, or the granddaughter of the tribe's shaman, for marriage into the other tribe.

The film is the story of a time when that practice failed, and then fell apart. Wawa, the teenage daughter of one of the tribes, was named the bride. Her marriage was promised; in fact everyone hoped it would provide an alliance that would end the long war between the island's tribes. Only, Wawa was already in love with a boy from her own village. She refused to obey her tribe's order, she would not be married to someone she didn't love for the sake of making peace. The whole tribe—father, grandmother, chief—tried to reason with her. They loved her, but for the good of all, they needed her to do this. If she selfishly insisted on following her own heart, she would put the entire village at risk. But for her, this was her life, her love--the one thing she could not compromise.

As you might imagine, the film ends tragically...but it also ends beautifully. Out of this impossible dilemma a love the people had for one another keeps re-surfacing. And then finally, a grace that broke the cycle of revenge that had captured and held these tribes for many years. It's a movie about tribal society, but it also shines on a light on the way someone gets sacrificed in *every* society. I recommend the movie to you; you can find it on Amazon Video, and probably in some other places online as well.

The book that introduced me to this movie used the word *intractable* to describe the dilemma of the story.¹ Intractable: a problem for which there is no good solution, no way out. Two stories that cannot live peaceably alongside each other. Sometimes we call these situations being “in between a rock and a hard place.” In *Tanna*, a young couple honestly in love, deeply committed to each other; *and* a responsibility to the community that made it impossible for them to be together. We know other intractable situations; in Israel and Palestine, for example—a land where two groups of people each have real and incompatible claims to the same land. Sometimes these situations happen in our personal lives: a parent or grandparent who needs every-day care, but who we fear will lose an essential part of their personhood in a care facility. We all might be part of an intractable situation now: living with a virus that can only be stopped by our separation from one another; and a shutdown of work and life together that is itself causing great hardship, its own deaths. An intractable, unbending impasse, where no compromise seems useful, or possible.

Once the same thing was true about life and death. The ancient story then, the cynical story now, says that life and death cannot live in the same picture; that one is the end of the other. But the Easter story changes that. Our tradition's story about Jesus' resurrection says, if we can imagine this is our story too, maybe life and death *can be* part of the same picture. Maybe there is a way in which the inevitability of death, even unjust death, even cruel death, isn't the end of life.

It's hard for we who have lived with the Easter story as the cultural water we swim in to understand how disruptive a story this was in the first centuries. You're probably just going to have to take my word for it. But I imagine that finding his tomb empty, and then quite a few people having the experience of seeing Jesus alive again, set back on their heels even people who thought they had known and understood Jesus well. I imagine they reviewed again—in their minds and their conversations—the things they'd heard him say before they knew his life was about something that powerful. And when they went back to the words of Jesus that they remembered, I bet they took in some meaning that they'd missed the first time around.

That's the context in which I want us to look for the next few weeks at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The way his followers must have looked at it after he was gone, now there had been Easter. Like them, we too have heard these words before. But now there's been coronavirus, this time that gives new meaning to many things. The words may be the same as what we heard before, but we are different.

This is how Matthew begins: "Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. He sat down and his disciples came to him. He taught them..."

Once you know that Jesus is something more than one more teacher, you can hear: there's meaning already packed into that first sentence: "Jesus went up a mountain." Listen: there's an echo here. Who else went up a mountain to teach, to speak for God? Moses. Moses, the leader who rescued the people of Israel from slavery and led them into freedom. Now Jesus. Jesus, who would save his people again. Matthew's story intentionally sets the scene: Jesus and Moses are parallel figures.

- Moses' story in the book of Exodus begins with his birth. He's hidden in a basket in a river, rescued from the order of a Pharaoh who would have murdered him along with all the other sons of the Hebrew slaves. Jesus' story too begins with his birth. He too is rescued, when his family flees the country to escape from Herod's order to kill all the Israelites' boy children.
- Moses and his people spent forty years in the wilderness on the way to the promised land. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness before his work began among the people.
- Moses went up the mountain to get the Ten Commandments for his people. Jesus went up the mountain to give those people's descendants the sermon that would be God's new word to them.

In the Bible's metaphors, going up to the mountain is always about going into the presence of God. Out of the presence of God always comes good news, important news. In Jesus' day, nobody had had any of that good news for a long time. In the last years before Jesus was born, the people of Israel had been notably short on good news from prophets—people who spoke for

God. It seemed to them that God had gone silent. Ecclesiastes, one of the last Old Testament writings before the birth of Jesus, says, with a note of almost-despair:

What do people gain from all at which they toil under the sun?...
What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done;
There is nothing new under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3,9)

They needed God's presence. They needed deliverance, and hope, and a new promise—just as their enslaved ancestors in Egypt had needed those things. They too were trapped in vicious cycles: of anger and violence, unfairness, materialism, greed, deceit. Work they wanted, needed, to do, but that sometimes felt like slavery to them. They were a long way from anything that felt like the flourishing life God had promised.

I think you might say that their problems seemed to them intractable. They were stuck—in between a religious tradition that had brought freedom and a good life to somebody sometime, and real life in the Empire, where that religious way didn't seem to make much difference at all.

And then Jesus led them up a mountain and began to speak. We'll talk more about what he said over the next few weeks, but let me just remind you now that the first part of that sermon was what we call the Beatitudes—"blessed are those who..." are all kinds of things we never want to be (meek, persecuted, sad). And then the sermon goes on with a whole series of lessons that begin "You have heard it said..." and continue with "...but I say to you."

Before that first Easter, I imagine some people thought Jesus was really faithful to the God of his religion—as he said he was. Others thought that couldn't possibly be true. This man ignored the most sacred things they knew. He disobeyed rules about keeping the Sabbath day empty. He violated all the ways they'd been taught about how to keep themselves pure—clean—for God. He was either faithful or a changemaker. He could not be both. Those two things did not belong in the same picture.

And then Easter happened. Somehow, this person seemed to have put life and death together. So they thought again about that sermon he'd preached to them up on the mountain. And when they did, they saw something they hadn't noticed before. That in this sermon, Jesus had walked straight into the people's intractable problems and said, 'There is another way.'

And isn't that—another way—what we need now, more than ever?

Grace, that word we use to describe the unconditional way God loves, has its own way of working. It is always breaking into things: unjust systems and stubborn habits that seem impossible to change, endings that look inevitable, doors that are permanently closed. Problems that are intractable. Hopelessly damaged people, like us. Grace—God's graceful presence in this world—is here to do something new. It's stronger and more disruptive than you realized, Jesus was saying in this sermon.ⁱⁱ It is always about making another way.

God is always making another way.
May it be so for us, even now.

ⁱ Steven Garber, *The Seamless Life*, 2020

ⁱⁱ I recommend to you Glen Harold Stassen's *Living the Sermon on the Mount*, 2006