

Sermon: Year B, Proper 8

Texts: Lamentations 3:21-33

II Corinthians 8:7-15

Mark 5:21-43

Where does one begin? Anyone who has ever written an essay or given a speech knows the difficulty of this question. If you start off on the wrong foot, everything that follows can seem terribly clumsy. This was certainly on the mind of the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar when he began his magnum opus. He put this issue front and center: on page one, paragraph one. And it was especially critical that he get this right because his project eventually extended into nine thick volumes and ran over ten thousand pages. He couldn't afford an initial misstep.

He was able, however, to reduce his answer to just one word – a first word, from which, he said, everything else sprang. That word was “beauty.” If you want to understand anything at all about God or anything at all about faith, then, he contended, you must begin with beauty. He called it “seeing the form,” learning how to look and what to look for. And if you lose the perception of beauty, then you will lose the vision of God.

His contention is particularly helpful whenever a passage from the Gospel of Mark is read. For Mark did not principally write to gather together a collection of facts about the life of Jesus, setting down what actually happened. He doesn't provide a lot of detail like Luke or offer frequent explanations like Matthew. His narrative is remarkably spare. Instead, he moves so quickly from episode to episode that finally what leaves the greatest impression is simply the way that God acts. His interest is in the form more than the content, the manner by which God's presence both surprises us and settles us.

This is perfectly illustrated in the two intertwined stories we have heard this morning. Jesus has attracted large crowds who are fascinated by what they have heard of him; he is also sought by Jairus, a man of stature and authority, who asks for Jesus' help in restoring his daughter to health. As Jesus sets out for Jairus' home, he is surrounded by a restless throng, who push and pull him along the road. The atmosphere is close to chaotic. And in the midst of all this jostling, Jesus suddenly stops and declares that someone has touched him. His claim is laughable. Everyone's touching him. He's being mobbed. How possibly could he notice one hand, someone reaching out to grasp merely the hem of his robe. The disciples wonder at the absurdity of this.

But Mark wants us to see the form not the facts. The person whom Jesus notices, the one he stops to acknowledge, is the least noticeable of all in the crowd: a woman, who is all the more diminished by having been ill for years. She would have had no standing and no natural place among the clamoring masses. She would have been the most invisible of all; and yet it is her touch alone that Jesus feels, and he pauses to give her recognition and, as she bows to the ground, to lift her up from the dust of the road and the trampling feet of all those around her. This interaction is a revelation of divine beauty.

Shortly thereafter, Jesus arrives at Jairus' house, and many are gathered there, too, this time in a tumult of grief. Jairus' daughter, they say, has died, and the air is filled with wailing. Once again Jesus pauses, once again for a woman, a girl, and once again he makes a ludicrous claim. The

girl, he announces, is not dead but sleeping. He sees what they do not see. And immediately the weeping of the crowd turns to ridicule. They are incredulous. He doesn't understand the brute facts that cannot be changed. Nonetheless, Jesus enters the house and with similar, gentle directness, he invites the girl to get up. "Talitha cumi," he says. Little girl, arise – arise from the dust of the ground and from the sorrowful cries of all those around. "Talitha cumi:" these two words epitomize the whole thrust of God's good news.

And once again, it is the form of the story that takes precedence. Jesus makes no great show of the moment. He delivers no speeches, nor does he reprove the scoffers. Quite to the contrary, he insists that no one run off telling tales of miracles, because what is most important was simply his own quiet attentiveness to someone who had been given up for dead. Mark even recorded Jesus' words in the original Aramaic in order to preserve the mysterious intimacy of the moment. Once again, and once again with an utter calm, what he revealed is the way of God, particularly distinguished from the usual expectations of others. Don't get caught up in fantastic claims and amazing reports, he implored, even a child being raised from the dead; instead, if you see the form of God, he said, you'll give this girl some bread. She's hungry.

Facts are debated, especially because they delimit our world. But beauty moves in the opposite direction: it continually opens the world to care, to devotion, and to praise. Faith doesn't contest the facts; it's simply our choosing to see and live in more than one dimension.

Part of the difficulty of being Christian in our age is that we are regularly dragged into arguments that aren't rightly ours, by people outside the church and, all too often, by people within the church as well. A sense of beauty is displaced by bickering, and in our eagerness to get things right and get our rights, we, along with the rest of the crowds pushing their agendas, turn our energies to winning by means of excluding. And the church then becomes just one more lobbying group, one more mob clamoring to gain its own wishes – when the better form is astoundingly subtle, like a insignificant woman who reaches out just to touch the robe of God.

Where does one begin? I'll gladly join with von Balthasar and say that, indeed, beauty is the best first word. And, I think, it fits perfectly as the best last word, too. How does one end? It's just as difficult a question, and just as fraught. But here, no less, seeing the form needs to be given precedence over simply reciting the facts.

One of the most striking things about Mark's Gospel is its very abrupt ending. Mark is explicit about the crucifixion. He leaves no doubt that Jesus died. But the resurrection isn't given the same clarity. It doesn't nicely finish the story as some fairy tales do, with the assurance of happily ever after. Instead, mysteriously, the resurrection in Mark merely signifies the end of endings, offering a future but one that is entirely unmapped and unpredictable – because it is God's and God's surprising gift to us. And this is where Mark stops, as if to leave us dangling. But we are invited to see how the form of God is able to trump even the most stubborn of realities. And in that empty space where no more words are given, God's beauty shows itself to be more eloquent than our truth.

In precisely this light, I must finish by saying that Saint Ann's is a parish of rare beauty, and not just in the usual sense of offering a space for worship that is visually pleasant and a liturgy that is

comfortably inviting. Well before I came, it was a community that quietly yet clearly sought to embody the Gospel, caring for one another and waiting upon God with a calm but expectant openness. This has never been a church of slogans, needing a theme, or looking for a way to make noise in order to get noticed or be a player. Amid the press of many sundry issues and controversies, Saint Ann's has maintained a corporate sense of contentedness that is itself a great gift – because it is neither self-satisfaction nor indifference, but a deeper combination of trust and hope that motivates without having to agitate. This is what we have inherited, and I have always been grateful for the distinct character of this parish. In my time with you, I've tried to honor this and build upon it. And thus, in my own arriving and in my leaving, Jesus' words seem particularly appropriate for so much of what is done here; away from the crowds and the frenzy of relevance, they re-echo in countless gestures of faith: "Talitha cumi...Talitha cumi" arise, little girl, arise continually, for beauty doesn't have a conclusion. And we are all made in this form, in the image of God.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen