

“Tightropes and Telescopes”  
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I want to introduce you to Rip, Rory, and Calhoun. They are timber wolves who live, as timber wolves do, in a forest somewhere in the north. And, as timber wolves do not usually do, they protect the creatures of the forest from harm and support them in times of crisis. If you haven't heard of Rip, Rory, and Calhoun before, don't feel left out. They are not widely known, but throughout my childhood, there were no dearer characters to my sisters and me than those three timber wolves. My father invented Rip, Rory, and Calhoun, and many nights at bedtime he told us of their adventures as we faded into sleep.

As I've said, Rip, Rory, and Calhoun were no ordinary timber wolves. Unlike their carnivorous counterparts in the real world, these wolves frequently saved the lives of squirrels and rabbits, snakes and frogs. Every night some hapless citizen of the forest got into trouble—a turtle found herself shell-side down at the bottom of a deep hole, a family of turkeys was trapped by a forest fire—and every night Rip, Rory, and Calhoun came to their rescue—digging a way out or leaping through flames. Being pack animals, they worked as a team, doing things they could not have done alone, and being the friendliest timber wolves to ever exist, they frequently enlisted the special skills of their fellow forest dwellers. These friends were always different, but their names were always Vincent, Katie, and Sarah. If a tunnel was needed, the wolves called on Vincent the Vole; if it was an aquatic mission they might talk to Sarah the Salmon, and if someone was caught up a tall tree they sought out the improbable visitor from down under, Katie the Koala—an invasive species. Each night, those in danger were saved, and each night the story ended with all the animals at a great party in the woods.

My father's stories, beyond being entertaining, were formative for my sisters and me. They held up a vision of a way of life, a vision of what he hoped we might become, and a vision of the world in which he hoped we would live. It was a fantastic world, of course, in which animals of all stripes lived in peace, a world in which tragedy and crisis were always met with the appropriate response, a world of justice and kindness and joy. It was a world not unlike the one which Jesus describes in his many kingdom sayings throughout the Gospel of Matthew.

I've pulled out some of the shorter kingdom parables for us to read this morning, but for Matthew's Jesus the kingdom is not simply the pearl of great price or the miraculous mustard seed. It is also a wedding banquet to which the poor and outcast are invited; it is laborers hired at 9am, noon, 3 and 4:45 and all paid the same wage; it is a place for those who keep their lamps trimmed and burning; it is a place where children and peacemakers, mourners and the meek, tax collectors and prostitutes are preferred to members of the establishment. Over and over again in Matthew Jesus instructs the people by telling them stories of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

And this has been a problem for Christianity. Priests, pastors, and theologians have been criticized for offering people visions of a perfect future in a land far away. The Church has tempted, and many would say controlled, people with hopes of pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by, and too frequently allowed such hopes and visions to substitute for

real love and care and change in the here and now. Jesus himself is not immune to such criticisms. Not only in Matthew, but throughout the gospels, Jesus can be heard talking to people about the kingdom of heaven, telling stories about what will be in some future place and time.

Most of us likely need few examples to convince us that heaven and earth have grown further and further apart in many strands of the faith. Last week, Larry preached about slavery and the Underground Railroad. It is clear historically that white Christians and clergy used this separation of heaven and earth to perpetuate slavery. While some white Christians might have been willing to concede that in the next life there would be neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, in this life, they maintained, Africans and African-Americans were called to submission.

The people to whom Jesus preached were also oppressed, also an underclass attempting to retain their culture and identity through a series of exiles and occupations. They were poor and outcast, disabled, thrown away, and, as we have heard, what Jesus offered them was a vision, stories of a different time, a different life. They were hungry and he told them bedtime stories. Of course, he often fed them and healed them too.

The progressive, mainline Church has shifted their focus to those more comforting stories of feeding and healing firmly grounded on earth and away from those strange pronouncements about heaven. It has struggled with such stories, or else stopped struggling and simply ignored them, preferring to focus on the physical, the active, the now. And I judge that many of us might feel the same way. We are all in favor of feeding the hungry, giving to the poor, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned, and most days we do a pretty good job of it. Why, when we are in the midst of such important work, should we pause to rehash old stories about a land faraway in a time still to come? People can't eat visions, and they can't warm themselves by the light of heaven's rays. It is better, we reason, to be firmly focused on the present, to live in this moment.

And that is a good thing. It is good to be present to those around us. Good to live in this moment, without worrying about tomorrow. Jesus says so himself. But there is also a certain tyranny of the moment; a prison we can construct of the present if we come to it unprepared. In the present moment we live in a world constructed by large, impersonal systems, by the powers of government, economy, law, custom. In the present moment we are faced with decisions to make, faced with difficult choices constructed by these systems, choices which can appear both necessary and impossible.

Consider the recent economic collapse when the only choice we seemed to have as a country was between resuming our endless consumption of goods or contributing to the economic collapse. Or consider the choice that many gay Christians are given between renouncing their sexual orientation or renouncing their faith. Consider the choice between stealing and starving, between staying in a broken marriage or dividing a family, between silently suffering through abuse or facing the chaos of speaking out. There are situations in all our lives from which we can see no way out, in which we cannot see over the horizon. We can all feel trapped in the present.

And this is precisely why we need those visions of a future reality. What Jesus' kingdom sayings suggest is that a vision of the future is a powerful weapon against the tyranny of the present, that telling a story of the way things will be is one way in which people of faith seek to change the way things are. In the Christian faith, it is that vision of the end which keeps one grounded in the shaky moments of now, that vision which lets us glimpse a further horizon, a new reality on the other side of this moment.

The image that I started with when thinking about this sermon was one of tightrope walking. I considered delivering this sermon from a tightrope, but remembered I don't know how to walk a tightrope. But what I do know is that a tightrope walker never looks at her feet but focuses her eyes on where she wants to go, but I like the image that Jenny Hill gave us a couple of weeks ago even better, when she demonstrated how a dancer keeps from getting dizzy while spinning by picking a point in the distance on which to focus and keeping her eyes trained on that point through most of her turn. What I love about both these images is that they demonstrate how such visions are not simply about the future, but also about the present.

History is right to criticize those who would separate heaven and earth and offer only one or the other. The reality of the stories that Jesus tells is that they are about both heaven and earth, both now and the future, both what is and what shall be.

When Jesus preaches that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit, he is not only speaking about the future; he is suggesting a different way of understanding people now. When he says that the kingdom of heaven is like a man who pays all his laborers a day's wage no matter how long they worked, he is making a statement about how people of faith treat their employees in his own day and ours. When he says that the kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field, for which someone is willing to sell all he has, he is not suggesting action in some otherworldly context, he is instructing his followers about what matters now.

As Larry talked about last week, many of the spirituals and songs from the civil rights era function in this way, with levels of meaning both in the present and in the imagined future. For me, no song does this more beautifully than "Come Sunday," which the ensemble just performed. Suffering discrimination in every aspect of their lives, Sunday in worship was a time when the African American community could gather in self-determined ways, expressing their culture and taking leadership roles. As the song says:

Up from dawn till sunset  
We work hard all the day  
Come Sunday, Oh come Sunday  
That's the day

But Sunday is also a symbol for a time when everyday will be as Sunday, when justice and peace will be woven into the fabric of existence. So the song says:

God will give peace and comfort  
To every troubled mind  
Come Sunday, Oh come Sunday  
That's the day

Sunday is both the most heavenly day of the week and a vision of the future heaven toward which the community is moving

In ethics, this kind of system is what they call teleological, from the Greek word “telos” meaning an end or a culmination, a purpose or an aim. No matter what you may have been led to believe, the Christian ethic is built, not on a set of rules to follow, but on a story and a vision of where creation is headed. It is a lesson I learned not from seminary but from studying playwriting. One of my first lessons in dramatic writing was: if don't know where you're going, you'll probably end up somewhere else. The playwright may not know all the details of the final scene when starting out, but if she doesn't have some idea, some vision of how the story ends, the play will wander as the characters begin to act without purpose or direction; the through line of the drama will be lost.

The same is true for us. Without some sense of where we are going as individuals, and as a community, and as creation, we are doomed to wander aimlessly, accepting the false choices we are handed by others. We can be dizzied by the choices offered to us in the present moment, and only with a vision on which to focus can we complete the complex twists and turns life requires of us. Such visions allow us to think outside the box and imagine a different ending than the one we had become convinced was inevitable. It is these visions which allowed Harriet Tubman and others to imagine a different relationship between white and black. It is these visions which allowed our spiritual ancestors to move beyond biblical literalism and imagine a Church in which all are truly welcome; it is these visions which continue to inspire people every day to take the first steps out of addiction, out of abuse, out of loneliness, out of hopelessness.

I believe we are called as people of faith to develop telos-scopic vision, eyes for a future of hope and promise, of justice and peace, eyes that can see beyond the present horizon to a different way. And we are called to share that vision with one another. Like loving parents, we are called to tell stories to one another, both biblical and bedtime, not as a way of escaping the present reality, but as a reminder of what we value and where we are going. We must tell each other stories of healing, stories of redemption, stories of light in the darkness so that those who need those stories will hear them and take heart. And we all need those stories. We tell each other stories of the people we hope to be and the world we want to live in, and we trust that such stories have the power to light the way through the present to a new future, a future which looks like a party in the woods to which all the animals are invited.