

Stories of Purification and Accumulation

(Part 3 of The 7-Story Framework Series)

Based on Mark 5:1-17, Matthew 9:10-17, Luke 12:16-21

A Message Offered by Toby Jones to FCUCC on September 16, 2018

Our journey continues through what Brian McLaren and Garreth Higgins are calling “The 7-Story Framework.” The concept behind this typology is that all humans are most heavily influenced by what these two progressive theologians call “Framing Stories.” There are, according to McLaren and Higgins, 6 main framing stories that are so common and frequent in their occurrence, that they have tremendous – and often unconscious - influence on how we think and act in the world. It’s vitally important that we be consciously aware of these first six stories and their affects on us, or we’ll never effectively embrace and live out Jesus’s 7th story. In the last two weeks, we’ve examined stories of domination, revolution, isolation, and victimization. Today, we turn our attention to stories of purification and accumulation.

The best way for me to introduce the purification narrative is simply to ask, “Have you watched the news at all in the last two years?” The current resurgence of so-called nationalist and populist parties and their candidates are retelling the purification story each and every day . These are the candidates, President Trump among them, who preach a gospel of anti-foreigner, and anti-immigrants. Their platform relies on a blame game that goes something like this: “Yes, we have serious problems in this country, and all of those problems were caused by foreigners and immigrants who have come into our country and polluted it. Our country used to be pure, but it is pure no longer. To rid our nation of its problems, we must first rid it of this foreign infestation. We must close the borders and arrest, detain, or deport all who have come in illegally.”

Now, even if we don’t agree with that perspective, I hope we can at least see its appeal to so many. It is a very attractive, appealing platform, and why...? Because it means that our problems are not our fault; they are “their” fault – whoever the “they” might be. So we don’t have to do any introspection, any looking in the mirror, or take any responsibility of any kind. That’s an appealing message. It places the

blame somewhere else, where we have zero responsibility for the problem.

We see this way of thinking in our first two readings for the morning, one from Mark and one from Matthew. In Mark 5, we hear the classic purification narrative of the Gerasene demoniac, a man who was seen as impure by his fellow townsfolk, so impure, in fact, that the town banished him. They chained him up to the tombstones outside of town, where they'd never have to deal with him again. This man was probably suffering from what we would call mental illness today, and let's face it, to a certain extent, we do essentially the same thing with our mentally ill today, don't we? We push them out of our homes and out of neighborhoods and lock them up in institutions, where we no longer have to be troubled by them in our daily lives.

Human history is filled with purification narratives, from the crusades of Christianity and Islam to Hitler and Mussolini, from the Ku Klux Klan to Steve Bannon and his buddies at Breitbart. And it's particularly important for us – who claim to follow Jesus – to take note of the fact that many of the worst perpetrators of the purification narrative were our brothers and sisters in the faith. That's why I included Matthew 9 in our readings a few minutes ago. In that story, it is the religious leaders – the priests – who rebuke and reprimand Jesus for doing what...? Fraternizing with society's dregs – the impure: sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, gentiles, foreigners, immigrants, half-breeds. It is the religious leaders of Jesus's own faith who seek to pull Jesus into the purification narrative. But Jesus won't buy it. It happened again and again in his ministry, and consistently, resolutely, Jesus says, "No, no...that's not my story. I will not be co-opted into your framing story, your contention that it is others who have caused all our problems." Paul put it like this in Romans 3: "No one is righteous, not even one of us. None of us is pure. None of us truly seek God. All have sinned and all fall short of the glory of God." Jesus said, "Don't focus on the splinter in your neighbor's eye when you have a log in your own." And of course, in that classic moment from Acts Chapter 10, God rebukes Peter for living out the purification narrative, saying, "Peter, don't call anything unclean that I have made."

The purification story is not the Gospel story. In fact, it has no place in Jesus's 7th story, as we'll see next week. Far too many Christians – most of whom don't realize it – have been far more influenced by the

purification story than by the Jesus story. Don't let yourself be one of them.

The other story category we're examining today is a particularly American one. It is perhaps best summed up by the incredibly obnoxious bumper sticker that says, "He who dies with the most toys wins." America is incredibly enamored with wealth and those who have it. Check out the covers of every magazine in that rack as you're checking out of the grocery store, and all you'll see are pictures of the 1%, the uber-wealthy. We drool over their cars, their homes, their surgically enhanced bodies and faces. We live for the details of their divorces and price tags of their weddings. We measure ourselves against others based on the number of digits in our annual salary.

When capitalism goes awry, as it clearly has in this country, all manner of excess creeps into our lives. As I've said many times before, why we tend to measure our own wealth and possessions against the Bill Gates'es and the Elon Musks of the world, we would do better to measure our income against the global average, which takes into account the more than 1/3rd of the world's population that still lives on less than \$2 a day.

We have SO much, you and I, far more than we'll ever need. But in our consumption-crazed, hoarding culture, we're always in the market for more. Jesus told an incredibly astute parable in Luke 12. He tells the story of a man who has such an abundant harvest - so much grain and wheat - that he decides he needs to tear down his current barns and build even bigger store houses for the vast amount he has accumulated. But the problem is, the man gives so much of his energy and time and resources to managing and making room for his plenty, that he neglects the far more important matters of spirituality and love in his life. He loses his very soul. He forfeits his chance to live a different story. He gets sucked into the accumulation story, and oh, my brothers and sisters, he is not alone. Millions upon millions of us have joined him.

We know that the Jesus story, the 7th story, is not about accumulation, right? We know that the Jesus story, the 7th story, is not about he or she who has the most toys winning, right? Jesus stripped it down to bare bones for us, saying, "If you have two coats, give one to your neighbor who has none. If you have two shirts, give one to the man who has no clothes at all." Today's CROP Walk gives us a tangible opportunity to DO exactly that - to share some of our abundance with those who don't have enough.

We know that Jesus also said, “Why do you people worry so much about food and clothing? Consider the lilies of the field; they neither toil nor spin and yet even Solomon in all his glory isn’t dressed more finely than they are. Consider the birds of the air; they don’t reap or sow or gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father gives them plenty to eat. If our heavenly Father cares so for flowers and birds, will She not also care for you, my brothers and sisters.”

Friends, we will not find Jesus in the narratives of purification or accumulation. We will not meet Jesus or find salvation if we’re living according to the purification or accumulation stories. To be a Christian, to be a true follower of Jesus, we must reject the various allures and seductions of the six stories that have ruled the world since the very beginning of time. We must say “NO!” and stand firm against the stories of domination, revolution, isolation, victimization, purification, and accumulation. We must, instead, open ourselves to the 7th Story, the Way of Jesus, the path of the Nazarene. It is a story of love, liberation, and life at its absolute fullest.

Don’t miss next week. Don’t miss the opportunity to hear and be changed by the 7th Story. Amen.