

Terror and Kingdom Come
A sermon preached at
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church
Edmonton, Alberta
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Text: Mark 3:1-6

This is a small story, but a story with a lot of heart. It takes place in a synagogue in Galilee. We don't know which synagogue, but it is somewhere in Galilee.

I was in a synagogue in Galilee a couple of years ago. It was in Nazareth Village, which is sort of a pioneer village idea in Nazareth; they re-create a village from New Testament times. Using the best archaeological evidence, they've re-created what a synagogue in Jesus' time looked like. It was a rectangular building. You come in the door, and along the three sides facing you, there are three tiers of platforms, where people sit. And so in the middle of this U-shape there is an empty space where a speaker can stand, read the Torah, look around and see everyone. It's almost like a Shakespearean theatre...everyone has a good view of the space in the middle where the action takes place. No one is far away, everyone can hear everything.

The story starts out with good news. The good news is that Jesus is out and about proclaiming good news. His mission, as we read last week in Luke 4 is to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18)

If I was making a movie of this story, I'd start with a shot of Jesus and a few of his disciples walking up a dirt road in the bright sun. They're talking among themselves, but Jesus is looking ahead. The camera pans around..."What is he looking at?" It's a road lined with white clay buildings, women scattered here and there. They aren't working, because it's the Sabbath. They look at Jesus and his followers with curiosity. There are no men on the street. At the end, at the top of the hill is a building set apart a bit. The door is open, but you can't see in. A closeup then of Jesus' face, there's a determination around his eyes. He keeps on walking up the hill to the building, which is the synagogue, his followers behind him. You can hear their feet on the dirt road, there's clouds of dust.

Because it's so sunny, when they come close to the building, the door is a rectangle of darkness. Jesus steps into the door, with one hand on the doorframe. You get a view of him from behind, the disciples' perspective...he is a figure of light framed by darkness. Then I'd switch the camera angle to the inside...you see Jesus from inside the building. He's a dark figure, framed in the light that is streaming in all around him. Then the camera goes back just behind Jesus' head, and you get his point of view, he sees the room filled with around 50 men. The camera pans the crowd slowly...lots of working men, tradespeople, farmers; some better dressed than others. There's a row of young boys, they're at the back, they're whispering among themselves, looking at Jesus. As the camera pans, it shows a group of well dressed men in the front row. They are wearing religious robes, they stare blankly, almost malevolently at Jesus. But his eyes don't stop there, the camera is still panning all the faces, slowly but carefully--he's still looking for something. The camera is almost around the room when it settles on a man in the back row in ragged clothes. The camera pauses on the face of this man, then it pans down from the man's face his face to his arm, where you see he is holding his right hand, which is curled up and useless...the camera pauses, then goes back up to his face. This man is looking at Jesus. The man's face is a question. He is looking to Jesus for an answer.

In my movie, there's a close-up of Jesus looking at the man. Jesus' eyes are filled with compassion. Jesus then glances over at the well-dressed religious men; they are tense, watching Jesus. Their eyes narrow.

What happens next? A synagogue is a place where people would go and talk about the scriptures. The learned men would ask questions, the people would answer, debate would happen. Jesus enters into this milieu with his first words. They are directed at the man with the withered hand. "Come forward," Jesus says. In the movie you are making, how would Jesus say that? In a commanding way? In an inviting way? Would he beckon with his arm, or would he smile in encouragement?

Jesus is standing in the middle of the synagogue, and the man with the withered hand comes to join him. The man is standing with him, but Jesus doesn't talk to him, he turns to the people who are all around him on the three levels; the well-dressed religious men in the centre; the farmers, the tradespeople, on both sides, the boys leaning against the wall on the highest bench. With a clear, pointed voice, Jesus asks, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" He is using the tone of voice of every rabbi, asking a question, making the people think.

Now for the Jewish people gathered around, the answer to this is crystal clear. First off, keeping the Sabbath was one of the Ten Commandments, so it was obvious you were supposed to keep the law about the Sabbath. Everyone there knew the Jewish interpretation of that commandment, outlining what work could or couldn't be done on the Sabbath. How far you could walk, legally, without breaking the Sabbath. What you could or could not lift. What you should or shouldn't do. But everyone in that room knew that scripture taught them that saving a life was a greater good than the good of not working on the Sabbath. This was something basic, that even the boys in the back would know. It was elementary.

Jesus has asked a question about saving a life, or destroying a life. But in front of them was a man they knew from the market, the man with the useless hand. This man wasn't dying, his life didn't need to be saved. Everyone knew that Jesus was capable of healing, he had a reputation. Would Jesus work on the Sabbath, would he heal this man's hand? Could he heal this man's hand? What was Jesus talking about, saving a life?

Jesus' question hangs on the air, you can see him scanning the crowd, looking for an answer. No one is speaking. They are torn...in their minds there is a disconnect between what Jesus is asking, and what he seems about to do. Everyone is looking at the man with the withered hand. The man with the withered hand is looking at Jesus. How do you show that Jesus is angered by their silence? Does he expel a breath loudly through his nostrils? Can you see him trying to control his breathing, or is it just the set of his mouth?

The camera zooms in on the religious leaders in their robes; they are frowning. Their faces hold no question, they aren't happy about this man with the withered hand standing there, they know Jesus' reputation, they know his power. They don't want a healing to take place on the Sabbath. Jesus, the story tells us, is grieved at their hardness of heart. In Greek the word for hardness is *porosis*. The two words used to describe the religious leaders are *porosis cardia*. Hardness of heart. These leaders are wearing their hearts on their sleeves, you can see their *cardia porosis*, in their crossed arms, in their clenched fists, their furrowed brows, in the tension of their bodies as they lean forward watching Jesus.

While Jesus has been addressing the synagogue, he has had his hand on the shoulder of the man with the withered hand, but now Jesus turns to him and says, "Stretch out your hand."

Jesus speaks, and the man stretches out his hand. There is no injunction against speaking or stretching out your hand in scripture, these two things are not classified as work. All we have here is stretching and speaking. And from these two simple, permissible actions, before their eyes, the man's hand is made whole. The man lifts his hand in front of his face...he turns it over, he flexes his fingers.

In your movie, what would you focus on next? The face of the man being healed? Or maybe the face of the boys, their mouths open, their eyes shining? The face of Jesus as he looks at the man who is healed? Or the faces of the religious leaders?

The religious leaders suddenly all get up and walk quickly towards the door. They have to walk right by Jesus and the man with the two good hands. Their robes brush the legs of Jesus. Jesus doesn't turn to see them go. Maybe I would have the camera look over Jesus' shoulder to the open door. Outside, you can see the figures of the leaders in the sunshine; they are talking among themselves, they're moving their arms, they're obviously agitated as they speak.

So here we have this story played out in the cinema of our minds. Jesus working to bring life, to bring wholeness, to bring healing to the man with the withered hand. He breaks no rules on the Sabbath, because he is bringing shalom, peace and wholeness. He has given this man a new life. There were other people in the room in need of healing--those religious leader all had *cardia porosis*. But they don't want help, they have left the building.

The leaders were so concerned about the holiness of the Sabbath. They don't want Jesus to work on the Sabbath. But ironically, it's the religious leaders who are breaking the Sabbath; they are in the street conspiring to destroy Jesus. Jesus' question was, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" It is the Sabbath, and these men are plotting to destroy life, something that is so wrong, it's not allowed on any day. This story is told in the third chapter of Mark, and this is the first time we hear that people are plotting to kill Jesus.

Maybe in my movie, I would have a final shot from high up over the village. There'd be music playing, a lovely tune as the camera shows the beauty of the town, the olive groves in the background, the everyday people on the streets, the children playing, the women sitting by their open doors, laughing: the beauty of ordinary life. But then you see this tight knot of men, the religious leaders outside the synagogue door. As the camera focuses in on them and their intense conversation, the music takes a dark turn. In the midst of life in all its fullness and beauty, you see these men with anger and hatred in their faces. They have met Jesus, but their *cardio porosis* has blinded them to who he was and the message he carried. With plots of murder and destruction, they want to strike terror in the heart of Jesus.

I use the word terror because it means "fear". These religious leaders want Jesus to be afraid of them. They are powerful, and they intend to use that power to destroy Jesus. They are wielding terror: would you call them terrorists? The word "terrorist" originated in the French revolution in the late 1700s. It was used to describe people who used violence and murder to scare people into compliance with a way of thinking. The religious leaders of Jesus' time probably had crucifixion on their minds. The terrorists of the French revolution used the guillotine as their weapon. Since then we've developed new weapons. For a while in the 1800s, people were using dynamite to scare people into changing their thinking, and a common word was "dynamitism". Dynamite was the

weapon of choice. "Terrorism" has become the descriptive word that we use all too often today to describe people who use violence to scare people into changing the way they think.

Do you remember the bombing that took place at the finish line of the Boston Marathon in 2013? In the hours and days after the attack, as the world was glued to their TV screens, the networks showed security surveillance footage of two suspects, two young men carrying backpacks which were filled with explosives. I remember the clips being shown over and over again, the high camera angle looking down on these two young guys walking by. I wrote a poem about those two young men, who looked like any young men I knew, they looked like my son, who was around their age.

Here's the poem: I called it "Surveillance"

Walking through the crowd with your backpacks,
surrounded by happy people on race day,
you weave your way purposefully
down the street,
around the corner;
you know where you are going.

I want to reach out
from my vantage point on high,
I want to call you by name so you look.
I would reach out and put a hand on your cheek
like your mother,
I would look in your eyes,
looking for the good boy,
I would hold that gaze.

What I wouldn't give
to turn you around
and send you home.
"Put those backpacks away.
Take those things apart.
What are you thinking?"

I would lay it out for you,
show you the cost,
the weight of human suffering;
the broken bodies, families, hearts,
the backlash, the anger,
more hatred spewing
and not out there, but here
(and I would place my hand on your heart)
you will lose something vital.

As you walk with your ball caps
and your heavy backpacks
what I wouldn't give to stop you,
stop this endless loop of you
walking the wrong way again and again

to the finish line.
Is it never finished?

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I think my poem is about the *cardia porosis* of these two young men. Terrorism involves a hardening of the heart, the unwillingness to put themselves in the shoes of the people they are about to destroy. Their hearts are rigid and impermeable to the life and beauty they are walking through as they stride towards the finish line.

Only one of the young men who planted the bombs survived. His name is Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, he is still in prison, he has been sentenced to death.

Now in the story in the synagogue, no actual violence happens, but Jesus knows what's in the backpacks of the religious leaders. Well not literally backpacks. Its daggers, rather---their glances are daggers. They will be successful in killing Jesus eventually, and Jesus knows it. In the meantime Jesus continues his work, his proclamation of release, his good news mission. The terrorism he faces does not change Jesus' heart. He continues to have a soft heart, a loving heart, even for his enemies, even for those who are trying to kill him.

This is what I want to draw attention to today in this story; Jesus never gets distracted from proclaiming the good news. He doesn't get distracted into hatred. He continues his work, he continues loving everyone, even up to the moment of his death. His soft-heartedness towards the people who crucified him is evident even during the torture of the cross; he prays for them because they don't know what they are doing.

We want to have a heart like Jesus, even in the face of terrorism. Terrorism is terribly dangerous. Of course it is dangerous for the people who it claims as victims, the people who are struck by weapons, whatever the weapons may be. But the danger is much deeper and wider than that. The danger is that *cardia porosis* is terribly contagious.

The Middle Eastern suicide bomber is hardhearted, they have to be as they strap the bomb to their body, as they walk into the square, looking for a crowded spot. They have to ignore the child on the bicycle. Their heart cannot be touched by the mother with her baby in a stroller, the old man leaning against the wall. The terrorist must be impervious, non-porous, untouchable, their heart has to iron-clad. That's the way they get the job done.

What happens next? In the words of Eugene Peterson's translation of Psalm 143: "The enemy hunted me down; he kicked me and stomped me within an inch of my life. He put me in a black hole, buried me like a corpse in that dungeon." The bomb goes off, the victims are victimized and survivors are created. The physical bomb has exploded, but something even more insidious exploded along with it. Hard heartedness, like a virus, snakes its way into the hearts of everyone who hears about this.

We see the headline on our smartphone, we click on the link, or we read about it in the newspaper, or we watch horrorstruck as it is played for us again and again on the evening news. "How could someone do that?" we ask ourselves. The hardhearted virus starts working in us. "They must not be human," we say to ourselves, "They are sub-human." Out loud, we start to agree with everyone that the terrorist and people like them must be destroyed. At all costs. The world is better off without them. The virus replicates, violence escalates. Where four people were killed by one bomb, in two weeks, five fighter jets lift off, ten bombs are dropped on the other side of the ocean, which is also a

terror, one hundred people are killed. Victims are victimized, survivors are created and hardheartedness explodes, radicalizing freely.

Except...when people refuse to give the virus a chance. You hear a report of terrorism. But instead of getting hardhearted, you challenge the words we use, the way society is framing this. What is a terrorist anyway? This sides' terrorist is that sides' freedom fighter. What would lead someone to strap a bomb to their body? Are you willing to put your feet into the shoes of a suicide bomber, even for a moment? What has led them to this desperate act?

In our world we want guilty and innocent, we want good guys and bad guys, and the media and our government, and the whole entire system is counting on *cardia porosis*. But that's where the Christian, the follower of Christ, doesn't give way to the virus because we are immunized by Christ. We are inoculated with the gospel. We cannot simply label someone as terrorist, when God has given them the name "Beloved". We cannot harden our heart to a person that Jesus died for. That's why we have this picture on the wall of our church, the picture of Dirk Willms. Dirk was an Anabaptist in the 1500s who ran over a frozen river as he was escaping from prison. The prison guard pursuing him followed him onto the ice. Dirk made it to the other side, but the guard fell through. What kind of heart will Dirk have? Will he have a hard heart, thinking of how he has been mistreated, will he keep on running? Or will he turn and help the drowning prison guard?



I read a blog this week which reflected on the picture. They asked, "Where is Jesus in the picture?" When I have looked at that picture, I have always thought that Dirk was the Jesus figure, stopping to

help the prison guard who didn't deserve it. But maybe, Jesus is in the water. Dirk sees the eyes of Jesus in the man who was drowning. "Lord, when was it that we saw you?" (Matthew 25:37) And Jesus said, "I was drowning, and you rescued me." Jesus in the eyes of the enemy. Eyes that will melt your heart every time. How could Dirk abandon Jesus?

When terror stares us in the face, we must continue to keep our eyes on Jesus. This will keep our hearts soft, and allow us to continue to proclaim the kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

This week I saw a picture of Darryl Byler, the head of Mennonite Central Committee US. He was standing in Syria, with two leaders from the Syrian Orthodox church, in their religious robes: Bishop Selwanos of Homs and Bishop Matta of Damascus. These two men have watched the bombs, heard the bombs, and buried the people killed by the bombs. These are leaders who have seen not only their church buildings destroyed, but the people, their flock scattered to all parts of the world. But there they are. The leaders are still there in Syria. Ron asked one of them, "In the middle of the destruction and killing in the war in Syria, do you feel that God has forsaken the church in Syria?" Bishop Matta replied, "The only thing we have left is God's mercy. The community has lost churches and schools and hospital, and many people have lost their lives, but no one can take away the faith in our hearts." There is no *cardia porosis* there...even though their hearts are broken, there is no hatred there. They are clinging to the mercy of God.

I was particularly struck this week by the tragedy that has unfolded in La Loche, Saskatchewan. A young man goes on a shooting spree. You could call him a terrorist, you could demonize him. So far, I haven't heard anyone doing that. I think that's because it's a small community, everyone knows everyone. They know this boy, they've seen him grow up. They know what he's gone through. I read that this boy was bullied, he had reached the end of his rope. Maybe there was mental illness involved, or addictions, or abuse. We haven't heard very much, but we will find out eventually. What happens next? Will there be hardhearted labeling, a kneejerk reaction to the terrible pain that they are in? Would it make people feel better if someone burned down this boy's house, with his family in it? That wouldn't solve anything...that would make the situation worse! Maybe healing can come through opening our hearts to pain, even the pain of the one who committed violence, the pain of his family. I see God's spirit working through the broken hearts in that community, as they try to make something good come out of something terror-filled.

We may not face bombs or gun violence this week, but we will face temptation. Temptation to harden our hearts towards someone in our family or community, or towards groups of people. As we come to the Lord's Supper today, we take heart from the life of Jesus himself. We will proclaim the good news of Jesus. We will see his face in the face of those we love, in the face of our neighbor, and even in the face of our enemy.