

Augustana College  
Chapel of Reconciliation

**HEALING THE BLIND MAN, EVENTUALLY**  
**Mark 8:22-26**

**Richard Bowman**

**24 September 2007**

Jesus is God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the father. Through him all things were made. For us and our salvation he came down from heaven. Or so we just confessed through the words of the Nicene Creed in all our litany.

Yet we have also just heard a story from The Gospel According to Mark in which it took this Jesus, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, two tries to bring salvation to the blind man. Yes, it took Jesus two tries to restore sight to the blind man.

Responding to a plea from friends of the blind man, Jesus put saliva on his eyes, laid his hands upon him, and asked him, "Can you see anything?" A odd question for Jesus, God from God, light from light, true God from true God. If we listen carefully, we can almost hear a hesitant hopefulness: "Please, tell me that you can see something, at least." Well the blind man can see something. He tells Jesus he can see people, but . . ." There should be no "buts" when Jesus, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, heals. The blind man can

see people but . . . they look like trees walking. Progress, I suppose, but I suspect that the blind man wanted more than progress, more than people who look like trees walking. So much for the attempt # 1. For attempt # 2, Jesus again laid his hands upon his eyes, but this time he also looked intently into them. The added stare seemed to do the trick, for the story teller notes that the blind man's sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. The blind man has his sight restored, but it took Jesus, the confessed God from God, light from light, true God from true God, two tries.

There is a seeming contradiction between the creed and the biblical story. It should not take Jesus, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, two tries to heal the blind man. When I asked a recent class what we should do with biblical stories like this one, disturbing stories which run counter to our entrenched creedal beliefs, one of my students suggested that we "keep reading." This approach is often followed by scholars and lay people alike who simply pass over these troublesome stories in silence. Silence though should not be an option. The question remains: What shall we do with this story.

Well, there are stories, and then there are stories. There are dominant stories, and there are subversive stories; there are normative stories, and there are stories with No Entry signs on

them; there are authorized stories, and there are impossible stories. There are stories, and then there are counter-stories.

What I am identifying as "the story" reflects the predominant way of understanding something or someone, in this instance Jesus. The confessing story of Jesus is represented by the creed.

What I am identifying as "the counter-story" reflects a different, even subversive way of understanding something or someone, again in this instance Jesus. Using seemingly conflicting images and themes, the counter-story moves in a direction different from that of the story. The counter-story is represented by Mark's account of an all too human Jesus, limited in power, as he attempts to heal a blind man.

Obsessively focused on coherence and consistency, interpreters often ignore, avoid, or even suppress the counter-story. However, novelist Salman Rushdie reminds us that these counter-stories have an important function. On these subversive, impossible, counter-stories quarantined with No Entry signs, he comments: "Impossible stories, stories with No Entry signs on them, change our lives and our minds as often as the authorized versions, the stories we are expected trust, upon which we are asked, or told, to build our judgments, and our lives."<sup>i</sup> Unlike many interpreters, storytellers, ancient and modern, secular and sacred, seem to recognize that truth is not

absolute, but nuanced--nuanced even to the point of contradiction. Hence the tales they tell include both "the story" and "the counter-story."

Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories offer an instructive secular example. Against the seemingly unmanageable political, social, and economic changes of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Holmes stories emphasize that reason and logic can control the seemingly uncontrollable aspects of these disruptions. In these stories crime and criminal activity, mirror the social disruptions encountered by Doyle's society. Holmes superior analytical powers identify the criminal and bring him/her to justice. These demonstrations of reason and logic suggest that larger societal disruptions can be dealt with in the same way.

Yet, before Holmes confronts the criminal in typically verbal, nonviolence encounters, he instructs his associate Dr. Watson to bring his pistol along. "The story" suggests that reason and logic will prevail over various forms of social disruption. "The counter-story" implies that reason may not be adequate to the task and that violence may well be necessary. Holmes frequent admonitions to Watson that he bring his pistol function as a "counter-story" recognition of the limitations of human reason and as an acknowledgement of the sometime necessity to eradicate evil through the exercise of violence.

The inclusion of elements from "the counter-story" may or may not be intentional. On one hand, their presence may reflect an unconscious or even intuitive grasp that the elements of "the story" may not be an adequate representation of the characters and events portrayed in the narrative. On the other hand, they may be an intentional, subversive attempt to undermine a normative, authorized understanding of these characters or events. Either way narratives have embedded within them counter-stories. As such, elements of "the counter-story" gently, or perhaps not so gently, nudge an understanding of the narrative in more inclusive, nuanced directions.

What is significant about biblical counter-stories is that they seem to be quite intentional. Included along with the dominant, confessing stories are the full blown counter-stories; not just images, motifs, or even sentences, but complete counter-stories like the story of Jesus healing the blind man.

This is not the only counter-story in Mark. There are several. For example, when Jesus returns to his home town, the towns people reject him wondering, "Where did this man did all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands?" The storyteller then notes that Jesus "amazed at their unbelief . . . could do no deed of power there." Faced with the skepticism of the

hometown folks, Jesus' exercise of authority appears to be compromised

On another occasion Jesus enters the Temple. Upon seeing the money changers plying their trade, Jesus physically overturns their tables and throws them out into the street. Angry at their misuse of the place of worship, he tells them that they had made this sacred space into a "den of robbers." So much for Jesus nonviolent, pacifistic teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that the meek shall inherit the earth.

What's even more interesting about these counter-stories is that there are no divine repercussions. Consider: No divine voice from heaven reprimands Jesus for his failure to heal the blind man on the first try; Jesus is not recalled for further training when he can do no deed of power when faced with the skepticism of his hometown folks; nor is Jesus "timed out" after his display of anger at the money changers. In no way does God intervene and attempt to put things right. This divine restraint suggests that God accepts Jesus humanness along with his human limitations.

Jesus himself even seems to recognize and acknowledge his own humanity, his own limitations. When a supplicant addresses him as "good teacher," Jesus immediately questions him asking, "Why do you call me good?" Without waiting for reply, he

sharply rebukes his petitioner saying, "No one is good but God alone."

What appears to be the deliberate inclusion of several counter-stories within the dominant, confessing story also makes counter-stories: confessing stories, albeit confessing counter-stories. This inclusion of confessing biblical counter-stories distinguishes them from such secular stories as Sherlock Holmes where the counter-story functions as an unconscious caution against a too easy commitment to the value system of the dominant story. In the biblical narrative counter-stories are not cautions but confessions, not unconscious subversions but intentional inclusions. The biblical counter-story is an intentional, confessing counter-story; and, as such, demands careful attention and consideration, not negligent silence and uneasy avoidance or even embarrassed suppression.

Rushdie argues that our lives and minds can be changed by what we can learn from counter-stories. So what then can we learn from this quintessential biblical confessing counter-story about Jesus two attempts to heal a blind man?

As we begin the new academic year and a new semester--even as we now approach the first round of exams or papers--it is helpful, maybe even reassuring, to know that Jesus didn't always get it right the first time, that there were circumstances in which he could not do something that he wanted to do, and that

he became frustrated, even angry. These confessing counter-stories are important because they free us from the need to get it right the first time; because they prepare us for the reality that we too will face situations where we will not be able to do something we would like to do; and because they affirm the range of our emotions as they include frustration and even anger.

As we face new beginnings, the confessing counter-story portrayal of a non-creedal, all too human Jesus whose power was apparently limited, whose authority was occasionally compromised, and whose emotions were at times unchecked offers us some consolation. Perhaps it even encourages persistence. After all, Jesus does heal the blind man, eventually.

I'm not sure what this portrayal says about the claims in the creed that Jesus is God from God, light from light, and true God to God, but I suspect that in some way which defies logic both the story and the counter-story are true. I am further convinced though that these confessing counter-story images of Jesus, in fact, portray situations in which we as human beings more often than not find ourselves. And as such these counter-stories firmly ground us in the fact that we are human and that we cannot escape being human. These confessing counter-stories then not only encourage us to acknowledge our humanity, but they also allow us to accept ourselves as human as God apparently accepted Jesus' humanity. What's more when we then find

ourselves in these all-too-familiar human predicaments, we can perhaps also voice with Jesus the humble recognition that God alone is good. And fortunately for us this good God graciously accepts us as human.

Amen, for now. I say Amen, for now, because I would like to continue the discussion of confessing, counter-stories by inviting you to a community discussion on Thursday at 10 o'clock in the 3 in 1 room in the Commons Building. I would like to hear your ideas about counter-stories in general and about this particular counter-story in which it takes Jesus two tries to heal the blind man. You and anyone else you know is welcome. If treats are an incentive, then please note that treats will be available. So until then: amen, for now.

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<sup>i</sup> Salman Rushdie, The Ground Beneath Her Feet (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), p. 199.

**MORNING WORSHIP**  
**Monday, September 24, 2007**

**Prelude**                      *Variation on "Ebenezer"*                      John Behnke

**Welcome/announcements**

**Invocation**

**Call to Worship**    Nicene Creed, ELW p. 104

We unite in confessing the faith, in response to each of these questions,

*Do you believe in God, creator?*

*Do you believe in Jesus, God's anointed?*

*Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?*

**Hymn**                      *"Thy Strong Word"*                      ELW #511, v, 1-2

**Scripture**    Mark 8: 22-26

**Sermon**                      *Confessing Stories/Confessing Counter-Stories*  
Dr. Rich Bowman

**Lord's Prayer**

**Benediction**

**Postlude**                      *"Ebenezer"*                      Aaron David Miller

**Chair of Moral Values Forum:** Dr. Bowman will lead the community in a discussion of this text on Thursday 10 AM in the 3:1 room.

October's text will be Ecclesiastes 2: 24-26 and 9: 7-11. Dr. Bowman will preach on October 15; the forum will follow on October 18.

## CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

**COMMUNITY SERVICE DAY** - Saturday, September 29<sup>th</sup>.

You are welcome to sign up to be on the Campus Ministry team. The sheet is on the Narthex table.

**SERVICE LEARNING** - Sign-ups have begun for the Service Learning trip to Pine Ridge, which will travel the over Fall Break. **Please sign up in the chapel office.** The cost is \$150 and includes transportation, lodging and most meals.

**ADVOCACY** - Advocate for change-work for a more just world:

**Tuesday, September 25 @ 10 AM** - Advocacy will be hosting a special student forum in the Chapel. Several students will share about travel experiences that changed their perspective on life and compelled them to work for change. "Let the world change you and you can change the world."

**Thursday, September 27 @ 9 PM - Siverson Lounge**

**Advocacy Kick-off!** Come participate in the first meeting of Advocacy. We are a student-led group that seeks to address a variety of topics of global and local concern by educating the campus and creating opportunities for action. Email [lmhibma@ole.augie.edu](mailto:lmhibma@ole.augie.edu) or [kjlenander06@ole.augie.edu](mailto:kjlenander06@ole.augie.edu) with any questions!

**SERVE THE BANQUET** - Campus Ministry has the opportunity to serve at the local soup kitchen, The Banquet, on Monday, Oct. 15<sup>th</sup>. If you would like to participate by either preparing the food on the afternoon shift, or serving the food at supper time, please sign up on the Narthex table.

### CHAPEL CALENDAR

Mon. (24 <sup>th</sup> )	Worship, 10 am - Rich Bowman, Reli.
Tues. (25 <sup>th</sup> )	Advocacy, 10 am - chapel
Wed. (26 <sup>th</sup> )	Holy Communion, 10 am - Mike Wanous, Biol.
Fri. (28 <sup>th</sup> )	Worship, 10 am - Kari Kintner, Sr. Spkr.
Sun. (30 <sup>th</sup> )	Worship, 11 am - Meg Eide, '08; Ann Pederson, presider
Mon. (1 <sup>st</sup> )	Worship, 10 am - Jesson Vogt, ASA Pres. - ASA Inauguration
Tues. (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	Catholic Mass, 10 am - Msgr. McPhee