

Year A, Easter 7, May 28th, 2017

By Tom and Laura Truby

Two Stories from Our Journey

We arrived at Wilson Ranches Retreat Bed and Breakfast on Saturday night with plans to stay for two nights. As was their tradition, the Wilsons served a big ranch breakfast at 8 the next morning and the ranch house was full with 16 guests eating at a long table. They served dark roast coffee, orange juice, scrambled eggs, bacon, muffins, canned pears, and Bob's Red Mill thick-cut oatmeal with all the "fix-ins."

We had just about finished breakfast when someone asked the host, the middle-aged daughter of the owner, why the road through their ranch ended after five miles with a huge closed gate preventing people from finding their way to the John Day River? She hesitated saying they try to stay out of other people's business but the bigger problem was absentee ownership of the land. Rich people, she said, came in and bought the land but they didn't take care of it, they didn't care about their neighbors, and they closed off their private roads so that nobody but them could use them.

People who have lived here all their lives and made a deep commitment to this land and the community that sustains it, now have the huge challenge of teaching the new comers how to ranch properly, how to value its people and how to honor their community. It is a monumental task, she said, and she feared they were losing the fight.

With tears forming in her eyes she brought up the polarization that has gripped the nation since the last election. She said they had African American people calling from Seattle to ask if it was safe for them to come or should they cancel their reservations. She begged them to come and said The Wilson Ranch had always been absolutely inclusive. The fact that they felt the need to even ask the question deeply troubled her. Someone said the media was fanning the flames. Everyone caught the depth of her concern and the conversation suddenly became serious and thoughtful.

I said that's why the Wilson Family has to continue to do what they were doing. It is only when people mix that we realize we are all human. If we don't mix we build up anxieties and tensions where each side begins seeing the other as monsters and the more this happens the harder it gets to maintain our perspective.

At this point I found myself saying the problem is dividing ourselves into "us" and "them." Even our religions divide us; saved and unsaved, Catholic and Protestant, Jewish and Atheist, etc., etc., etc. What if we had a faith that centered on there being no one excluded; with non-exclusion as the criteria for membership; where you couldn't exclude anyone and be in good standing?

The room went silent. All eyes were on Laura and me and I was afraid my thinking would fragment. Is that even possible, someone said. I have never heard of such a thing, someone else added. Where do you find this kind of religion, asked a third. That's what Laura and I are preaching, I replied. We think it's the heart of the Christian gospel. A kind of tension,

hopefulness, and excitement became palpable in the room. The seed had been sown. We had taken it as far as we could. Someone changed the subject with a question addressed to our host.

In the passage we read from Acts this morning, Jesus is about to Ascend. The disciples, still thinking that Jesus will lead them in their fight against Rome, ask him, “Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom of Israel now.” They won’t give up on that till Jesus is physically gone from their midst. He is within moments of leaving and that’s their last question. They are still looking for an “us” and “them” solution powered by Jesus where outsiders are excluded. Jesus tells them, “It isn’t for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority.” Even if they thought they knew the times and the seasons it would only lead to a misunderstanding about the kingdom. The kingdom is a way of seeing and living that exists outside and yet within human boundaries. This is something they can’t understand right now. They will need the Holy Spirit before it begins to come clear.

So, instead of their having things under control and designed according to their specifications, Jesus tells them they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them and it will be different than they had thought. With it they will find themselves witnessing to truth in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. Samaria, by the way, was the hated territory of their enemy.

On last Sunday morning at the Wilson Ranch we felt the presence of the Holy Spirit on us all as we talked about inclusion and “us” and “them.” The Holy Spirit is powerful because it teaches us about an identity built exclusively on no one being rejected. Since rejection is what we all most fear, the idea that nothing separates us from the love of God strikes us as incredibly Good News, particularly when we realize that this also changes our relationship with our neighbor.

Here we were on vacation in Fossil, Oregon, on a ranch eating breakfast when we found ourselves in the midst of witnessing to the truth hidden from human kind since the beginning of culture—that truth that there is no “us” and “them,” and we are all loved children.

We said there were two stories, but we have only talked about one. Since only breakfast was served on the ranch, the other meals were up to us. The Wilsons had a small building out in the yard called “Elfie’s Kitchen” that was available to all guests. It had a sink, refrigerator, stove, a few needed cooking pans and a couple of barbeques. Of course, every one shared this space.

At four o’clock I dashed to the General Mercantile in Fossil, they closed at five, and bought a beautiful fresh head of broccoli so that we could have it with the chicken we were barbequing. I put it in the refrigerator but not in the tied grocery bag that contained the rest of our stuff. At six we moseyed out and began preparing our meal. Other couples were already eating. The broccoli was missing! The nerve! Someone had stolen our broccoli!

We looked out the open kitchen window and there was a couple approximately our age with fresh, steamed broccoli. Laura, much to my chagrin, very loudly says, “Tom, where is the broccoli.” I saw the wife look up in alarm at her husband and pretty soon she appeared at the kitchen door offering us what was left of the broccoli they now realized had been ours. They

couldn't find words apologetic enough—there had been a misunderstanding. They thought this was the broccoli management had promised to get for them while they were out biking. They found out later their broccoli was in the refrigerator in the Ranch House kitchen.

We laughed about it and sat down with them at table, a gesture of forgiveness. They were curious about us and with reluctance we disclosed that we were clergy of two, quite different, denominations. We asked if they were affiliated with any denomination. No, the husband said, he had gone to Catholic schools and had left it as soon as he could. He figured he had done his time. His wife said she had never been part of a church but now found herself looking for something. We said in the last 20 years we had found something that really worked for us and it centered on Jesus as the revealer of the truth of a non-over-against, non-violent God who actually loves all humanity.

We explained Girard's three insights that we were finding so powerful. First, human beings desire the desire of the other; we want what we think the other has and we do this automatically and from the beginning of our life. Second, wanting what we think the other has puts us in rivalry with each other and we would have destroyed ourselves if we, as a species, hadn't discovered the mechanism of turning on someone vulnerable and blaming them for our problems and thereby draining us of our collective venom. And third, Girard said the Judeo-Christian Bible revealed this process uniquely and most clearly in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus where Jesus allowed himself to become our victim so that we would see what we do and then he forgave us for it as he died. God then raised Jesus from the dead because only Jesus' resurrection was powerful enough to overcome our resistance to seeing this truth about ourselves.

They were fascinated. The wife said she wanted to come to our churches though they lived in Eugene. She asked how she could get more information and we gave her Girard's name and Paul Neuchterlein's website.

They were still excited the next morning. A shaft of light had come through the clouds. The conversation initiated by stolen broccoli had given them hope.

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be witness in Fossil, Oregon, at the Wilson Ranches Bed and Breakfast, and to the ends of the earth. Amen.