Art is Better Than Straight Talk

Winter in Michigan so you go to more movies. Great ones lately: *Fences, Hidden Figures, Arrivals, Loving, Manchester by Sea, and Moonlight*. If LA-LA Land gets best picture, I'm going to boycott the Oscars for the rest of my life.
Late wife Nancy saw obscure-artsy movie with Brad Pitt/Jessica Chastain: *Tree of Life*. It's a head-spinner, that movie.

Nancy comes home from movie and I ask, "What did you think?" She says, "I don't know…that was a strange movie." Next day at son's family for dinner and Nancy is telling about the movie and while she describes it, bursts into tears. Wow! that movie really affected you— "I was thinking about it all night!"

For all our praise of **straight talk**—plain simple speech where the point is obvious, that's not really what our souls crave. A good movie, song, piece art doesn't straight talk us. It prods and puzzles us and makes us go "Huh!" and we pause and wonder until a light bulb goes on and we're moved deeply.

Of 6 amazing movies I've seen in the last 3 months, *Moonlight* moved me the way only art can do. A coming-of-age story of a young black gay man living in poverty. One furtive, non-graphic, sex scene half way thru—his first encounter on a beach with another guy. The two young men lose contact, but years later they reconnect. Spoiler alert: when they reconnect later, it's revealed that this early encounter on the beach was his only sexual encounter at all, and how much it meant to him all these years.

And I came away thinking "That's the most powerful and tender movie I've ever seen about the meaning of sex."

For 500 years, since Protestant Reformers gave us the slogan Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone as our authority) we've been trying to squeeze Bible into a "plain truth-talking" straight-jacket. The Bible, in this view, clearly states truth with no ambiguity. As clear as nose on your face. Read & believe.

The Bible is better than that. It's at least as powerful as good art. **Brad Zinn helped me see this.** It's a **means of grace** to **involve us with God**—like a piece of art invites us to think, feel, question, argue, wrestle, and most of all engage. Or as our **boxers** Pete & Rich would tell us: boxing isn't about the knockout punch. It's about the dance & weave, back-forth. Can I get a witness?

In Matthew 13, Jesus tells a string of parables or stories to engage people with his kingdom coming. Parable of sower is about a farmer who scatters his seed—some gets blown on a path and trampled, some nestles among some thorny plants and gets chocked out, some lands on hard soil and withers quick. And some lands on a patch of good dirt and makes it all worthwhile.

Jesus tells this story to a crowd so big, he goes out on a boat on a lake to use the water as a natural sound system. When he's done, the crowd disperses and his disciples and some wanna-be disciples stay behind and ask him, "What was that all about?"

They were used to a different sowing for harvest story. Sowing for a new harvest was classic story to address their deepest national frustration. Prophets used this image to speak of messianic age of deliverance. Babylonians had ravaged Israel—like armies of Grant burning the crops of the Southerners, sowing resentment that is still with us. Messiah would come to make everything right again. He would sow Israel back in their land to bring a harvest of righteousness. Sowing seed for a big harvest…that was Israel's "God's gonna fix it" story.
By time Jesus tells his version of the seed-sowing harvest story, people expect big messianic things of him. His story—more goes wrong than right [3/4 of sowing is a failure]—is a disappointment.

Crowd disperses shaking their heads—what a confusing Messiah! But a smaller group stick around, and press for more. To them, Jesus says, *"The secret of the Kingdom has been given to you, not the crowds. That's why I tell these stories—to see who gets a burr under their saddle enough to stick around"*

Something about this weird version of the sowing-harvest story resonated**. It was as jagged as their reality**. Maybe this is how good comes into the world: Always mixed results before payoff, false starts before big finish. No one writes the next great novel without first writing a lot of crap that only a mother could love.

Edison tried 1,000 different filaments until he found the one that lit his bulb. Asked how it felt to fail 1000 times he said I didn't fail 1000 times. It took me 1000 steps to succeed.

A story like this, fits your life better. Fab 5 (Chris Webber, Jalen Rosen, etc.) would make a lousy sports movie: Coach recruits 5 ringers and they take him to finals first year! Great sports movie is about team of misfits who misfire time after time but they stick

together until they start gel, then some big setback but they crawl back until magic happens at the end to make it all worthwhile.

Why does that formula always deliver? Because real life feels like a set up for a great comeback movie.

Life is a story or mixed results. Parable of the seed helps us **scan the horizon** of our life not focused on the false-starts and failures but on the patch of good soil where a few seeds landed a while ago and there's some green shoots coming up.

That's the power of art and it's better than straight talk.

To his smaller group he gives another story of mixed results. A farmer sows some fantastic seed during day, but during the night some crazy neighbor lady came by and threw weed seed all over his field. He has to watch as his field grows wheat or whatever it was—the stuff he wanted—right alongside scratchy ugly stuff that makes your kids start wheezing.

The farm workers are incensed and they want to go out and pull the weeks right away. But farmer says: "Don't do that! Use your head! We'll pull the weeds, yes, but in the process trample the wheat. No, wait for harvest time, then we cut it all down together and separate the wheat from the weeds then."

This Is how progress happens sometimes. After a long time waiting a crop of righteousness is sown and the wheat begins to rise. Then there's a set-back. One that can't be reversed immediately. You're watching the set-back play out, threatening all that progress. Like the bad dream you can't wake up from….

I grew up in Detroit, most segregated city in US, with an all white police force. Had a time of civil unrest that the white Detroiters called a riot and the black Detroiters called an Uprising. 4o years later, we elected our first African American president. I could barely believe it. Then I worried for 8 years that the crazies would assassinate him because I came of age when JFK was assassinated followed by Malcolm X, MLK, and RFK.

He made it 2 full terms exits as most popular President in decades and what happens next? It's not that we elect someone with a different political philosophy. Fair enough. But no, it's not that.
We elect someone who appoints as his top WH strategist, the former head of the biggest media outlet for White Supremacists.

Every day we wake up to more news. One day it's a Muslim Ban.
People with Green Cards stuck in the airport. Next day its Climate scientists scrambling to save their data because their new bosses are hostile to their data sets. Next day wake up and ICE is rounding up so many people, we have public school teachers in Austin TX, feeling like they better walk their immigrant family students home from school, to make their parents haven't been rounded up by the feds.

It won't get any better soon, from my perspective. I'm going to be like that farmer watching the weeds sown by his crazy neighbor lady growing up in his fields alongside his wheat.

A story like this pulls me in by sharing my frustration. But there's hope once I vent that frustration. Farmer reminds me that there's a reckoning coming. At harvest it all gets cut down and sorted. For me, that day is called mid-term elections and I'm thinking, "I need to get my head in game for the mid-terms."

My inspiration in that piece of kingdom of God art called this parable? I need to be the farmer who goes into his barn and starts getting his tractor ready, does some maintenance on his combine, fixes the flat tire on his grain cart. Waiting in the Bible is not a passive thing. It's active preparation for a day or reckoning.

Should *everyone* get same message I do out of the parable? That's not how art works does it? Was anyone else moved by the movie Moonlight? I'll bet you got something out of it that was different than what I got out of it. Was the movie bad because it didn't send the same plain message to everyone? No that's what makes it a powerful movie.

The Bible is more like art than straight talk.
Which makes it more powerful, more helpful.

Funny how these quirky mixed result stories pack so much punch.
Jesus tells the people who come back for more of these stories that he is giving them **the secret of the kingdom of God**.

Maybe the secret is not being put off by mixed results. The secret is not letting all that wasted seed that falls on hard-hostile ground keep you from emptying your seed back anyway. Because a little bit of seed on a good patch of dirt can make it all worthwhile

The secret is not getting so discouraged when you're in the part of the story where the weeds are getting taller before anyone can cut them down….and you don't' give up, you

don’t give in, you don’t go into hibernation. You do what you need to do to get ready for Round 2 or Round 2000.

In both parables, Satan (the accuser, the adversary) makes an appearance. He’s devouring seeds like a flock of birds in the one story. In the other story, he’s crazy neighbor lady sowing weed-seed at night. Oh, Satan is a busy boy in these kingdom stories.

But just because he’s huffing and puffing doesn’t mean he can actually blow the house down. And the way to defeat him is to ignore him, to pay him no mind. And in a world of mixed results, to keep your eyes on the surprising good that survives and rises up.

QUIET REFLECTION

2017 is the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Launched by Martin Luther who reacted to abuses in the church justified by the church's claim to be able to declare truth since that authority was given to the Pope/Bishops. Luther said, No, that authority is given to Scripture alone. Sola Scriptura.

Of course, the only way that works is if Scripture is self-evidently clear about what it says. So, the Protestant Reformers said, "Yep, Scripture is clear to the average person." This doctrine was called PERSPICUITY of Scripture (not opaque, but you can see through clearly)

We've been living with that for 500 years, but it hasn't held up well. People claim great certainty about "What the Bible says" and sometimes the magic works and sometimes it doesn't. This can empower people to believe God loves them—a good thing. But it can also empower people to baptize their bias against women or gay people or people of a different race, as "What the Bible says"—based on a few texts taken out of context.

So we take a different approach at Blue Ocean. We think the Bible wasn't meant to be a stand-alone book. It was always meant to be a help—or what is called a "means of grace" along with other means of grace, like prayer, and community, and reason, and experience.

Furthermore, the Jewish people (and the Bible is a Jewish book, after all) always knew that the Bible needs interpretation and that's what rabbis did. They often differed in their interpretations, but that was fine. That made for a more robust conversation. Even though there were different rabbinic schools in Israel (Hillel and Shimmai were big ones) you generally picked a rabbi whose approach to the Bible resonated best with you. For us, that Rabbi is rabbi Jesus. So our approach isn't sola scriptura so much as solus Jesus.