

Some years ago, at a Friday school mass in my homily I told the story of how the soft, gentle Mr. Rogers from the old TV show had actually served in the Navy SEALs during Vietnam War. Only to have someone come up to after mass and say, "Father, actually that's an internet hoax. It's not true." I felt like an idiot, embarrassed. I really wanted it to be true, it fit so well into my homily . . . but I should have known and checked. There are a lot of similar stories out there. The world is awash in what some call false narratives. We live in a hackers' paradise of "fake news" and stories that are too good to be true . . . unless maybe they are true. The Russians were banned from the recent Winter Olympics for drug violations. In retaliation they hacked the Olympics computers, pretending to be North Koreans (who are also famous for hacking). What a mess.

Today in my forth Rerouting homily I want to look at how, not only our politics, but also our faith life, can be threatened by false narratives and fake news. These first four weeks of Rerouting have

been background before we go forward laying out the Great Story. Last week I preached about the film “Saving Private Ryan” and the real meaning of the mass: that when we are at the Eucharist we’re actually standing at the foot of the cross – and Jesus on the cross asks us for a response to His sacrifice for us. The week before, I had preached about some of the ways that truth is obscured by our own interior confusion about our faith, how we minimize what God wants to give us. This week I want to preach about how the outside world works to obscure the truth that Jesus brings us by presenting opposing visions of reality. And these competing stories can block us from the total commitment to Christ necessary for becoming Missionary Disciples and saints.

Russians hackers and others who want to mess with us, plant false stories that get us fighting with each other. They undermine our faith in our institutions and leaders. They confuse us and make us doubt. False narratives work the same way on our spiritual lives.

One of the ways the secular world does this is by making the life of faith-- being “good” – seem, not just an intellectual in error, but, in fact, embarrassing and very unsophisticated. And that makes us want to hide our faith because it will make us look foolish – “Everybody knows it’s all a Mr. Rogers story, after all,” the world says, “You’re all idiots to believe in it.”

Another approach the world tries is portraying discipleship as too hard or too boring. It’s too much work for normal human beings, so we must measure out carefully our commitments to it and take periodic breaks. Remember how I said that some of the material for Rerouting comes from Fr. John Ricardo’s parish in Michigan? Well, the Deacon there tells the story of driving through Detroit and seeing a Billboard sign for a casino that read, “Take Time off for Bad Behavior.” This kind of idea is behind, for instance, some of our difficulties in getting to mass on vacation, keeping to our prayer time at home. How easy it is to subconsciously agree with the world that our relationship with God is

part of our work. We need time off from it periodically. It's part of the boring routine of life. We need a little sin sometimes or we'll get warped psychologically.

We live in a time and culture that wants to encourage that tepid streak in living out our Catholicism. The world pressures us not to share the faith, not to live as energetically as Jesus wants us to live, but to keep our relationship with Jesus to ourselves. The world pushes faith to the peripheries. One way our popular culture and entertainment does this is to present committed religious people as dangerous, violent, fanatical. And think of how 9/11 has contributed to that perception. To be passionately religious these days is, for many people in our society, equated to being a potential terrorist, or at least a hater.

Instead, the secular world's story-tellers embrace and celebrate doubting Christians, those whose faith is ambiguous, not strong enough to change anyone – even themselves. The “good” believers in their

stories are those who, by the end of the TV episode or film, have evolved into a more “enlightened” view.

Is there any wonder that we Disciples of Jesus are often confused and afraid in this environment? I was vulnerable to that false story about Mr. Rogers because I was naïve about hoaxes. I’m a little more careful now. Maybe not everything the “smart people” or internet says is true. Rerouting is, in part, about growing strong enough in our faith to resist the false stories about Christ and His followers that are out there. And then having our eyes opened so we can see Jesus working in our lives, so we can understand that God really has blessed us -- His story is true.

The world wants to tell us that to believe the Church’s story of Jesus means we must be either – ignorant, masochistic and doomed to psychological frustration, or socially dangerous. I wonder, how many of those attitudes we have partially absorbed from the cultural air we breathe?

Over against such spiritual pollution stands the Gospel. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” As we meditate on the Great Story and our place in it, we will meet with obstacles arising from our own unhealthy ideas about faith and God. But we’ll also have to push through the fog, fake news, and false stories of this world. We’ve marinated in those worldly viewpoints all our lives, so, of course, we feel their power. But don’t be fooled by them as we experience challenges, doubts, and difficulties in understanding the scriptures and story of God’s love for us in the weeks ahead.

Bring your Bibles next week – and read Genesis Chapter 1 to prepare.