

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Sermon 5.13.18

Scripture: Acts 1:3-11  
John 17:6-19

### Authentic Reproduction

I need your help with something.

At the hotel where we stayed last weekend in Charlottesville, also staying there with his family was boy a year younger than Jack. The two played in the indoor pool together for quite a long time on Friday afternoon into evening, all while I sat watch from the poolside sofa.

As it happens, just outside this glass-walled atrium, on the hotel's large back patio, a wedding ceremony was taking form. Hotel staff were setting up rows of chairs, hanging garlands of flowers on the plastic pillars that served no discernable purpose but to give shape to an otherwise open space, and a D.J. was setting up a sound system.

As the pool area was one of two ways to access the patio, wedding guests began to pass through. I'd tell the boys, "No splashing," when someone came along in sequins or shiny sandals. The other way was down a grand staircase from the lobby, which I could see from where I sat but was behind another clear-glass wall so safe from splashing.

Eventually, a most unexpected thing happened: Darth Vader came through the pool area and headed out to the patio. Moments later, a Jawa followed, one of those little creatures that rode in a sand crawler, collecting scrap metal and selling droid units on Luke Skywalker's home planet, Tatooine. When Jar Jar Binks came down the grand stairs from the lobby, I yelled to the boys, "Guys, look! Here comes Jar Jar Binks," which had the boys pause their play and watch in puzzlement. And then a storm trooper appeared.

Of a guest who was coming through, I asked, "Is this a *Star Wars* themed wedding?"

"Yes!" she said, and I realized, of course! It's May the fourth! *Star Wars* day! It made some sense, now, so when Darth Vader was back inside and walking past, I was able to muster a knowing nod of hello.

The boy though, Jack's new friend: he asked Darth Vader, "Hey! Show me your light saber!" which Darth Vader did, lifting the plastic saber and turning it on to light up red. From the pool, at a bit of a distance, maybe twenty feet, the boy said, "I don't think that could really cut. I

don't think that's a real light saber." And he turned to Jack and assured him, "I don't think that's the real Darth Vader."

Jack looked at me funny, trying to understand this. Later on, he confided in me, "That kid can't really be ten. I think he's a lot younger. What did he mean that wasn't the real Darth Vader? There is no real Darth Vader."

This boy, it seems, lives so deeply within the simulacrum that he doesn't even know it's simulacrum. And that's good—because once you know that nothing means anything, that it's *all* simulacrum and nothing is real, not only can you do nothing about it, but you can also *do nothing*. The utter transparency of the absence of import paralyzes you.

That's what theorists of the simulated and the simulacrum seem to think anyway—and I'll admit I have my moments too.

Generally speaking, simulation according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is the action or practice of simulating, as in a fire drill or as in how a pilot might train for flight. But simulation can also be done with intent to deceive. Consider, to dissimulate is to pretend not to have what you have. So to simulate can be to pretend to have what you don't.

Relatedly, simulacrum is defined as "a material image, made as a representation of some deity, person, or thing," as "something having merely the form or appearance of a certain thing, without possessing its substance or proper qualities," and as "a mere image, a specious imitation or likeness, of something." Like the simulation, the simulacrum bears a resemblance to the thing that it imitates but only on the surface level, and in this it is, Plato explained, "a false claimant to being."

Simulation and simulacrum: one is the action of, the other is the product of, falsification or mimicry.

That's generally speaking. More theoretically now, simulacra is a copy of something that has no original, a signifier that points to another signifier, never reaching a reality. A plastic model of Mickey Mouse isn't a copy of an original, but is simulacra in that there is no real, or original, Mickey Mouse. Of Kentucky Fried Chicken, there once was a Col. Saunders, so the logo featuring a sort of likeness is along the process of simulation and simulacrum, but is not pure simulacrum. Of Wendy's Hamburgers, though, there never was a Wendy, and that image of a red-haired girl in

the logo is her picture—the image of a girl who never was. There never was a Wendy, and that is her picture. This is pure simulacrum.

As it happens, some think that all of this can be distinguished from mere representation. Representation: the making present again of something that's elusive but perhaps also abiding. Re-present-ation: the assumption that there is indeed at least *something* to make present. That's my hope—that in representation, we can interact with the real, can invoke or re-member the real.

Simulacrum, though, creates a hyper-real because it's so convincing a copy that it supersedes representation in terms of the accuracy and power of its imitation. It fascinates more than engages—as in, like, who wants to go to a boring old Good Friday service when you can stay home and watch Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*? It was just so *realistic*! Or maybe you could even get your pastor to screen the movie in church instead of having the usual boring old service. That would attract the young people!

All this is theory I came across while reading a music review of an album by an artist about whom I can't decide whether his music is good or sort of wicked, a yucky thing I couldn't stop attending to.

So I decided to get another opinion.

I never read music reviews, but that day I did. I just had to figure it out. Dependent as this album is on technology upon technology, and illustrated with album art that is painfully candy-colored with a depiction of the singer as a hunky cartoon, the album, which is audaciously entitled, "The Human Condition," had even this professional critic wondering whether he was hearing "real" music that was "good," or some gross simulacrum of music that was also ridiculously compelling and perhaps therefore evil. This is the album equivalent of the "The Cheesecake Factory," Shane Morris wrote. "It's pop, hip hop, rock, some electronic styling, acoustic indie, and bits and pieces of everything else. [There's a gospel choir thrown in there somewhere, and the whole thing comes together as a sort of musical, with a prelude and a medley-finale. But] it's not just that – everything on each song is just a little more than you want."

And from here he wades into some French political theory.

Jean Baudriallard, born in 1929 and deceased in 2007, in his seriously dense, though very short volume, *Simulacra and Simulation*, published in 1981 and translated into English in 1994, lays

out a four-step process that he calls the Procession of Simulacra, a procession that societies follow, and that all civilization has followed, and back from which (sorry!) there is no return.

The first step produces images that reflect, or represent, a profound reality. They are faithful to the reality. Portraits are such a thing, as can be religious icons or practices.

But these, religious icons and rites, teeter into the second step in the procession, what can be considered a perversion of reality, wherein images mask and denature a profound reality. This was what made Protestant iconoclasts so anxious and extreme that they'd go to the trouble of violently destroying so much religious art—the suspicion that those icons were doing violence to the God the purported to make present. More recently, this is perhaps where religious art becomes “kitsch.” This might also be the step that, having taken it, made Norman Rockwell consider himself an illustrator instead of an artist. Presenting a “perversion” of reality, he “realistically” depicted life as it never fully was, which feels deceptive, if gently so, at least to me.

The third step of the procession of simulacra is in the production of images or artifacts that mask the absence of a profound reality. This is a realm of pretense, of pretend, and for this Baudrillard considers Disneyland, situated as it is in Los Angeles, though as if a world apart, as if standing in contrast to the “real world” that is Los Angeles and, by extension America, What it actually masks, though, is the *absence* of a thusly-real world, Los Angeles being as phantasmagoric as Disneyland, and America being so as well.

He writes that Los Angeles is “but a network of incessant, unreal circulation—a city of incredible proportions but without space, without dimension. As much as electrical and atomic power stations, as much as cinema studios, this city [is nothing] but an immense scenario and a perpetual pan shot...”

As for America, here are lyrics from one of the songs from “The Human Condition,” whose cartoonish, technologized producer I might either love or detest (I still can't decide), a song called “Morning in America”: “We're secretly out of control, and everyone knows.”

Now, the fourth and final step on the procession of simulacrum: the image has lost all connection to reality. It is pure simulation—the sort of realm in which a reality TV show star and brander of all kitsch might play the president of the United States, a fact that one blogger/theorist explained is horrifying to us not because “President Trump” embodies power but because he unmasks power's absence; and in which the unreal Darth Vader is actually Darth Vader because

pure simulacrum is never what hides the truth. No, simulacrum is the truth that there is no truth, which means the simulacrum is the truth, which means that little boy was wrong because that Darth Vader was the real Darth Vader in that neither are real and that is what's real. Like poodles that are represented in manipulated balloon animals, which are simulated in steel as huge sculptures for city installments, which are made in a factory that's called a studio because it's overseen by the artist who conceived of it, Jeff Koons, and who managed to sell one for \$54 million because the fact that it's such pure and self-aware simulacrum is what makes it art, the question though as to whether it was an original being a tragic question, a *meaningless* question.

The presence, however, of Darth Vader—the *real* Darth Vader—at the wedding did cause me to wonder, is this a real wedding? And what is a “real wedding” anyway? Does a wedding have reality? Is it true?

As it happens, I've heard that a lot of our wedding traditions come from soap operas. These were the first mass market simulations of wedding ceremonies, and they gave everyone a sense for how they're supposed to be. So maybe what makes a real wedding is the degree to which the ceremony simulates Luke and Laura finally tying the knot.

This all recalled for me a cultural collision from a year ago. Jesse had been watching the calendar for the approach of an annual conference called “Star Wars Celebration.” It touches down in places all over the world, but it's in America usually every other year. Last year, it was in Orlando, Florida, just outside Disneyworld. It coincided with school break. Tobias and Jack would be the perfect age to love it (though, given Jesse's love of it even as a then forty-six year old man, I suspect every age could be that perfect age). So he bought tickets to it—a four-day event. And he bought airplane tickets—a trip that would put them in Florida around the same time his parents would be there visiting his aunt. Since it spanned a weekend, it was a given that I wouldn't join them, which was fine with me. I didn't really want to. It would have been, frankly, a distressing experience for me—indoors and air conditioned, with huge crowds, featuring a world based on movies I enjoyed yet was happy to leave as but movies, didn't need to inhabit, didn't need to simulate.

Winter turned to spring, and the date for their trip approached, and we realized—and to my shock and sorrow—that the Star Wars Celebration began on Maundy Thursday and ended on Easter.

My first thought was about how far Western Christianity has fallen as far as cultural influence is concerned. That a conference aiming to attract thousands of people could reasonably coincide with the most important Christian holiday and not worry about losing too much of their participants, to say nothing of offending the sensibilities of a majority in the host country: ouch. But I get it. We can't expect our society to prop up our faith.

My second thought was sadness that everyone would be away during this important time.

It was fine, though, of course. I didn't mind so much. I mean, it's not like I've got tons of time to spend with my family during Holy Week and Easter. And it's not as if the boys missing Easter in church would have some lasting effect on their lives of faith. And *Star Wars* is a "universe" I approve of. It seems to have a sound morality, its story and characters even mapping close to the story and characters in the Christian faith. "May the force be with you," people say. "And also with you," comes one reply, recalling an exchange in Christian liturgy. Sure, war is a big part of it, but...whatever...

Because, really, what's the difference if I'm enacting the last week of Jesus' life, from his entry into Jerusalem and the Temple on Palm Sunday, to his instituting the Eucharist at the Last Supper on that Thursday, to the arrest and trial and condemnation and crucifixion on Good Friday, to the labored silence of Holy Saturday when I rest up and prepare for what's coming, just like those ancient women, to Easter itself, when we uncover the cross to find in it glory and when we go to the tomb to find it empty and when we begin again, though now as a resurrected people returning to Galilee to renew ourselves in the work of the gospel by which God's will might be done on earth as it is in heaven?

Yeah, what's the difference if, while I'm enacting one story, they're interacting with another, taking in all the movies, from *The Phantom Menace* to *The Force Awakens*, surrounded by fans in full garb—storm troopers and Yodas and Jabbas the Hutt everywhere you look? After all, I could just show them *The Passion of the Christ* to remind them of what they missed.

And, I mean really, aren't we all just simulating some story—one that isn't really even either of ours? (But why, then, last summer, when someone peeked in through the back door of this sanctuary to snap a picture of us at worship [so quaint!] did I want to punch him in the neck?) Because who can say that one is truer than another, more valid, more real, more significant of a reality of which it's a sign, and not just a pile of signifiers pointing to other signifiers?

Have you heard of the Cave of Lascaux? Discovered in 1940 in southwestern France, this ancient cave features prehistoric drawings, nearly 6,000 images of animals, people, and abstract signs. Amazing! The human need to represent our reality! It's always been with us!

The cave was opened to the public after the Second World War, receiving as many as 1,200 visitors a day. But this threatened the 20,000-year-old paintings—light and new air currents in the caves resulted in the growth of lichens and crystals.

So the cave was closed to visitors in 1963.

But then, twenty years later, a replica of the caves opened up. Called Lascaux 2, it was extremely popular. But it was located too close to the real caves, so it started threatening them, too, with mold spreading through the walls and ceiling.

That's why Lascaux 4 was built with the most modern techniques, and far away enough from the original caves.

Lascaux 3 is the name of an itinerant exhibition shown in different locations worldwide.

Or you could just go to Wikipedia. I found some great pictures of the images there.

And apparently Werner Herzog has made a spectacular 3-D documentary of the Cave. The movie is called *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*.

And speaking of ancient history, the Ark Encounter is a museum-slash-theme park featuring a “life-size” replica of Noah’s Ark. It simulates his real experience in taking care of all those wild animals on an ark, with impressive animal statues that look so real (we think, because this was a long time so, the website is careful to explain, some of the animals look different than what we’re used to.) But there are real, live animals at the Ark Experience too—some goats, a few emus! There’s also a zip-line there, so that’s fun.

If that’s not your scene, though, have you ever considered the Cloisters? An outcropping of the Metropolitan Museum in Manhattan, the Cloisters is a cobbling together of medieval churches and monasteries from Western Europe, dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the 16<sup>th</sup>. Art dealer George Gray Bernard and financier Nelson Rockefeller acquired these cloisters, chapels, and halls from Italy, Spain, France in the late 1930s, had them dismantled at their sites, and brought to a four-acre plot of land in upper Manhattan’s Fort Tryon Park.

Now, neither fort, nor chapel, nor church, nor cloister, the Cloisters is filled with religious art, and some secular art too. (Try drawing that line of distinction. Good luck!) Beautiful, and at

such peaceful remove, this has become as a beloved retreat for many New Yorkers who just need a reprieve from the constancy of the brutal marketplace that is New York.

It's also just a nice place to visit as a tourist. I myself went once when I was in New York. I found it beautiful, moving, until I figured what it was (and what it wasn't) and then I wanted to cry.

And speaking of tourism, I still haven't told you much about my trip to Hershey, Pennsylvania, which isn't a town whose name became associated with a candy bar that was manufactured there, but is a man's name, he who invented this candy bar, the manufacturing of which he would see to in the factory he established in the town of Derry, the governance of which hallowed for the unincorporated township called Hershey.

We went on the trolley tour that drives you around the sites of Milton Hershey's bold and generous life—his homestead, the site of his first factory, the school that he founded and that his estate continues (generously, astonishingly!) to fund for kids who are otherwise terribly disadvantaged.

Then you can take a factory tour, except it isn't in the actual factory but in a simulation of the factory (because they can't have millions of visitors a year traipsing through a food manufacturing plant), and you can design your own Hershey bar experimenting with all sorts of new tastes, except not really because so many people go through there that I'm sure all the combinations have been tried before, and then you manufacture it, except not really because the machines and belts and everything are behind Plexiglas—otherwise, you might get hurt—so employees of the “factory” actually see to all that, but you *do* get a hairnet, so there's that.

Then you can take another tour, but for this you're the one on the conveyer belt, in a little car like you'd see on a rollercoaster, and you ride past a cute farm where there are singing cows and a singing pig, and in front of you on a screen inlaid on the “dashboard” of this “conveyor belt car” there appears a real human woman, and apparently a factory worker too because she's wearing a white coat and because she told you she works in the factory (but no hair net for her), and you ask your husband who's sitting beside you, “You can see those singing cows too, right,” because you're so full of sugar by this point, “and you can *hear* them? And why is the woman replicated on a screen while the singing cows are here in their full three dimensions? Shouldn't a woman seem more real than singing cows?” and your husband pats your knee because everything will be alright.

And speaking of farms, have you ever described Gould Farm to someone you know, and included the fact that it's a "working farm?" Time was a "working farm" could simply be called a "farm."

And speaking of work, while doing research for this sermon, I found a great article entitled, "Fiction-based Religion: Conceptualizing a New Category Against History-based Religion." Concerning the new religions gathering around self-aware fictions such as Star Wars, Middle Earth, and Hogwarts, this article weighs their worthiness against "history-based religions" and finds much to commend them.

I'll admit, I'm still not convinced. (What about that distinction to be made between simulation and representation?)

That said, the article was so provocative of my thinking that I printed it out instead of just reading it on-line because I find if I read print on an actual page I retain a lot more of what I've read. Apparently, I'm not alone in this. Studies show.

This morning, Jesus has left us. Thursday was Ascension Day, the day when he's remembered to have been taken up out of their sight on a cloud never to be seen again.

Having gone, though, he seems also to have been concerned with how he might yet stay with us.

The readings these days from the Gospel of John are drawn from Jesus' so-called Farewell Discourse and Priestly Prayer. They speak to his concern that, while he's to be "no longer in the world," they (which is to say, "we") will yet be in the world—and this is a world of political violence (crucifixion!), and of personal despair and meaninglessness; this is a world where what's true will become obscured by the signifiers that purport the urgency of truth but deceive us.

How, then, to keep us attached, like branches on the true vine? How, then, to keep us remembering what the machinations of history, and the magic of hyper-production and productivity, would have us dismembered from?

When we enact the Eucharist, we're not going for "realistic," we're going for representation—re-presenting what is yet always present.

But maybe I'm deluding myself—and because I simply "can't handle the truth," a line actor Jack Nicholson said in that movie that was based on a play that was based on a real event, which was all about a man who knew the only truth was our need for his protecting the hyper-

productivity that is American society with force, deadly force if necessary. Maybe I can't. But when we're paralyzed by this world in which Jesus left us and yet never leaves us, he suggested we just gather and break some bread, and by this we might re-member him, dismembered from him though we might seem.

So this is where I need your help. Is this representation or simulation? Is this true bread or some simulacrum of what's true, and thus the only way by which this could be said to be true?

I'll eat of it anyway, and invite you to as well.

Actually, I'm put in mind of an apophatic chant I've heard prayed, "If God is, then that is right; if God is not, then that is right."

Thanks be to God.