

Big Shoes to Fill

Marc Mullinax
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
July 19, 2009

Preaching is like cooking. You take some of this, some of that, add this spice, that herb, marinate, let it stand, let it rise, cool it, grind it, process it. And then you fry, bake, broil, or grill it, hoping all the while that some flavor in the recipe comes through.

Preaching's sorta like that. You take measures of biblical text, a pinch of church history, a sounding of the day's news, a righteous amount of theology, dust it with a little prophetic pixie powder, some pastoral passion, mix it all up in a congregational bowl, and maybe, just maybe, a sermon emerges that speaks to someone besides the speaker.

These two stories out of Mark 6 are stories of breathing: fast, slow, and somewhere in between. For our story-characters in this reading are on the way, on mission, doing the Jesus thing ... except they didn't always know what that meant. Can I get a witness?

I know something about breathing. Who doesn't? Who has not been so busy, when breathing is so rapid and shallow, that you forget who you are in the coming and the going and the meeting of yourself again as you pass back and forth? We've all been in that uncontrolled space, when you don't even remember or have time to eat.

But who here has not purposefully slowed down, become intentional and mindful about the one thing one was doing, dwelling in the present moment (for there is no other moment available), and found that in doing nothing, many things happen, and in silence, one hears many things?

Both kinds of moments are our disciples' cup of tea.

The last few verses of our text come only after what must have been a frenzied feeding of 5,000 people, on five bread loaves and two fish. Word must have gotten out that this Jesus and his friends are the hottest ticket in town. The disciples are beached at Gennesaret, the crowds are coming back at them, their worst medical cases in tow. The disciples are getting ready for an assault of the needy, upon the very ones who really needed to slow down and just breathe.

Now ain't that just how life is for us sometimes? "Great, just great! What else can happen today? What else can go wrong? What else can my boss throw at me?" That never happens here, does it? At this church – the one my friends call "the hippie church"?

We get – even in our "hippie-ness" – so keyed up. So busy. So like that wind-up tin soldier, marching for some reason, but not exactly sure who got me all wound up, and what direction I'm to go. Endless loops of tape we are; Möbius strips of busy-ness, preserving the illusions that all that's occurring and breathing me hard is somehow ... [sigh] bringing in the kingdom of God. Maybe so. Or maybe we get confused about the hither and yon-ness to which we are cast and thrown about ... and confuse busy-ness for the workings of the Spirit. Does the Spirit catch us, or is it caught?



It's September 1984. Ridgecrest Conference Center. I'm a speaker at a youth event. There's this singer I've heard about and even met once, Darryl Adams. (He's been here at Circle of Mercy, too.) We renew our acquaintance-ship, and he intuits that I am down and depressed. In my last year of seminary, busier than I'd ever been, but not knowing what I wanted to do with this call to teach; not really wanting to do the Ph.D. thing because of all the years that that would mean. A crisis of meaning in a 28-year old.

Darryl takes me to his van, parked nearby, and we talk. Then he says, "Interested in Lord's Supper?" Strange question. I nod yes. Sure.

"Well," he said. "Ain't exactly got any fruit of the vine, but I do have some crackers, and some home-brews. Will that do?"

The darkness parted by the light of my smile. And so we partook. Time stopped. Breathing started. The present opened up to a thin place in the world.

Thank you, Darryl, for being part of the sacrament that night at a Baptist conference center, using alcoholic contraband as spiritual technology. (Whatever scratches one's itch.) Being brought back to the present, by any means necessary, to the grace that is there and having its day, having its say, whether I hear it or not. As Annie Dillard reminds me, "The least I can do is show up and be present."



Circle of Mercy has been showing up and rolling along for 7 ½ years. Rolling stones gather, I say. I would like to liken our common pilgrimage to climbing a mountain. We're on this long, sometimes steep mountain climb. (You may want to cue up in your heads: "We are climbing Jacob's Ladder.") We are united by the story within us that gives a spring and a purpose to our steps. It is the story of what it could mean to follow Jesus in our time.

We are not the kind of folks much interested in resting with answers; we'd rather be arrested by or wrestle with questions. Jesus' story catches us up, catches in our throats, intrigues us, organizes us, gives us a reason for living—and living well. It is a story that is sturdy, realistic, elegant, messy, and complex – just as life should be – and we get increasingly magnetized to it, getting more and more oriented to its Axis of Good.

You see, this Gospel/God business is like a 100 million-piece jigsaw puzzle (without a picture on the cover), and we are just one person among millions, one congregation among hundreds of thousands, trying to figure it all out. We each have got our place and a place to stand, our piece and the chance to speak our peace. We're each a resolute part of its solution. And that puzzle just wouldn't be the same if just one person decided to hide their piece, not fill their shoes.

Marcharemos – "we march" – on this mountain climb, animated by Jesus' story, in ways that make the news and in ways that never will. *Marcharemos* for health care, justice, peace, undocumented sojourners, food for all, rights for those wronged and those on the wrong side of power.

This Jesus story that drives us mountain-ward captures our deepest joys and struggles, engages our wildest yearnings, and brings jaw-dropping wonder at what God has wrought, and what God can wring from the likes of us. It teaches us to see the beauty in the ugly, the wonder of the everyday, the last things in the least of things, the first counted among the last, and how the "not yet" is in the "already," with more "not yet" on the way. We have tickets for it. Jesus' story holds us together, day by day and week by week, as we seek creatively to join the "is" with the "ought," match up the eternal with the now, read the Bible with the *Citizen-Times*, find the "not yet" in the "already," and hear the music with the silence.

The Jesus story captures our deepest joys and struggles, engages our wildest yearnings, and brings jaw-dropping wonder at what God has wrought, and what God can wring from the likes of us.

And so we climb, with Stevie Wonder's "Higher Ground" as our soundtrack: "Powers keep on lyin' ... While your people keep on dyin' ... World keep on turnin' ... Gonna keep on tryin', Till I reach the higher ground." As we walk along together, we feel the permission at times to lead the rest of us in a mission that captures our collective heart, to seek out the ever-changing voice and face of God as we encounter neighbors on death row, or skid row, or Saville Row.

Circle of Mercy was my last-ditch, last chance of a church. Perhaps you, too. I thought Annie Dillard's idea of what church could be like had a fighting chance here. Dillard writes:

The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." [i]

So we are on this journey, working off this Jesus story, never to return to whatever it was that ... well, you know. Sometimes we get lost, but people who love us find us again. We may take wrong turns. We have amongst us our rangers and trail-blazers; and we have our providers, the water-carriers, the folks who care for the other hikers. We have our stragglers, oh yes. I mean, who here has not sometimes wondered what the heck we are doing climbing this mountain with these people!

Maybe we even want to kick someone off the mountain. We've all got baggage – right? – that we carry with us. But we do know, by the campfire when we are all together at night, that the vision of community in 1 Corinthians 12 is our gift as well. Each of us carries sacred pieces of the divine puzzle that no one else can convey. Quoting Paul:

Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The

variety is wonderful:

- *wise counsel • clear understanding • simple trust • healing the sick • miraculous acts •*
- *proclamation • distinguishing between spirits • tongues • interpretation of tongues •*

All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. He decides who gets what, and when.

You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts—limbs, organs, cells—but no matter how many parts you can name, you're still one body. It's exactly the same with Christ. By means of his one Spirit, we all said "good-bye" to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything.

So now, my Circle, my spiritual homies, we climb together this one mountain. The object is not to arrive at the top, but to seek out the tired, poor, confused, and imprisoned along the way.

We're always "*marcharemos*." Always climbing Jacob's Ladder. Always on the trail, listening to God through Sly and the Family Stone: "I want to take you higher." The journey itself is far more than enough to keep us energized. It is the companions along the way who are enough. "I get by with a little help from my friends."



OK. I am in the market for some present tense, my fellow Circlers. It's perhaps time for a little pulse-checking. Earlier, I asked you to switch shoes with someone. This little experiment I asked us to engage in was not just for fun, though I hope you have had fun as you slipped your feet into someone else's shoes. *Marcharemos* for a mile in someone else's shoes. The idea here, of course, is to get us used to thinking outside our own skin.

Buddhists have a sense of original sin, but hardly that of Christian understanding. To the Buddhist, it is to think of oneself as an isolated bag of skin, with no more connection to the person beside you than to someone across the world. In other words, the thinking that I can be an entire, whole, "shalomed" person "all by myself." And so we sustain this unsustainable illusion, that we are separate and whole, and have no connection to ... basically most of the world.

I take this to heart. When I do weddings these days, it's always one theme: What happens to the one happens to the other. There is no individual in isolation, hermetically sealed. What happens to the one happens to the other: for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health.

Garrison Keillor, my current favorite philosopher, correctly said, "Nothing we do to children is ever wasted." I have meditated on this for years. For years. At first, I couldn't get past how everything bad that happens to children enters them through the hands of parents and society, into their tiny bodies and minds and souls, and grows cancer-like from the radioactive stuff that we feed 'em. And that's a depressing thought, however true it might be.

But the alternative view is also true: Nothing that we do for children for love, safety, shelter, to make them feel needed, blessed, and just sheer joys to be around ... goes to waste either! What happens to them happens to us. What happens to us happens to children. What if, with children, nothing ever goes to waste? Can I get a witness stand?

When you look at our congregation in a few minutes, when all the kids return, notice the huge proportion of people under 16 in the room. Most congregations would love that percentage. I want to highlight it so that we don't take it for waste.

We have some important deliberations coming up concerning the direction of spiritual education of our younger members, piecing together a future view of how it may be on this mountain. They deserve our presence, for we have their shoes to fill. We long for a safe and vital place for our children. Come, please, and be a part of this conversation. Let's wear their shoes this week as we prepare. What happens to the one... And nothing we do for them is wasted.



There is a book coming out in two months about Jarvis Jay Masters, who remains an innocent man on death row in California. One day there was a seagull out on the yard in San Quentin. It had been raining, and the seagull was there paddling around in a puddle. One inmate picked up something and was about to throw it at the bird.

Jarvis didn't even think about it; he automatically put out his hand to stop the man. This escalated the man's aggression and he started yelling. Who the hell did Jarvis think he was? And why did Jarvis care so much about some blankety-blank bird?

Everyone in the yard started circling around, just waiting for the inevitable fight to begin. The other inmate was screaming at Jarvis, "Why'd you do that?" And out of Jarvis's mouth came the words, "I did that because that bird's got my wings."

Everyone got it. It simply stopped their minds, softened their hearts, and then there was silence. Then they all started laughing and joking with Jarvis. Even years later, they still tease him. "What did you mean, Jarvis, 'That bird's got my wings?'" But they understand.^[ii]

Aren't we over-stressed and over-committed enough? Of course. But let's slow down. We have big shoes to fill. These children have our wings.

Sing with me: *Marcharemos en la luz de Dios*. "We are marching in the light of God."

Amen.

[i] Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, p. 52

[ii] Pema Chodron, *Practicing Peace in Times of War*.