

The Hard is what makes it Great
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One of my favorite movies that I watched over and over again when I was a kid was A League of Their Own. It tells the true story of the All American Girls Professional Baseball League which existed from 1943-1954. The League was a way baseball owners responded to World War II—many men got drafted or volunteered to go off to war, including some Major League Baseball stars like Ted Williams, Joe DiMaggio, and Bob Feller. To keep our great American pastime going during the war and boost up spirits on the home front, women athletes stepped in and played professionally.

A League of Their Own narrates these true events for generations who might not have ever known this story otherwise. Tom Hanks plays the manager of the Rockford Peaches, Jimmy Dugan, and Geena Davis plays the talented catcher and anchor of the team, Dottie Hinson. The movie line most people remember, since you often see it featured at the Oscars in those classic one-liners reel, is an exasperated Jimmy Dugan telling a pitcher who tended to get emotional a lot, “There’s no crying in baseball!”

But another great line comes after Dottie’s husband returns home from war. Dottie decides to quit the team before finishing the season to go back with him to Oregon to start a family. And Jimmy confronts her about sneaking off and quitting, telling her that she will regret this decision for the rest of her life and that he thought she was a real ballplayer. Dottie’s response is that she has her husband now, she doesn’t need to play, and anyway it just got too hard. This is when Tom Hanks as Jimmy Dugan has another great movie line, telling his catcher as she’s about to give up on her dream, “It’s supposed to be hard. If it wasn’t hard, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great.” Dottie does come back just in time to finish the season behind home plate with her team.

I couldn’t help but think of Jimmy Dugan trying to get his ballplayers in line when I read Jesus’ words to the disciples in Matthew. This is tough love. This is basically a whole set of instructions to say—there’s no crying in baseball and it’s supposed to be hard, the hard is what makes it great. After all, “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master.”[1] Since Jesus had a rough go of it, the rest of us will not always have an easy time following him either.

We tend to make Jesus into a sort-of peace loving, cool hippie in Progressive circles. But being in line with the prophetic tradition of Judaism and being a day-laborer from Nazareth, an outsider to many folks in power from the start, it’s safe to say that Jesus had some rough edges. And he had some high expectations. Following him wasn’t about recognition and respect since he urged his followers to be humble and regard themselves as servants of all. As Lance Pape of Brite Divinity School says, “If Jesus were really the enlightened and affirming nice guy we often insist on imagining, should he not have been able to stay out of trouble? What incited people to call him such appalling names (prince, not of peace, but of demons)? Why would following him wreck families? How did he end up on a cross?”[2] Jesus had difficult teachings. The work of creating God’s kingdom on earth is more subversive and even controversial than just being nice all the time.

Now it being graduation season—with commencement ceremonies occurring across the country in May and June—I often try to follow what speeches are particularly inspiring or even controversial on any given year. One inspiring commencement address was from Civil Rights activist and Congressman John Lewis at Emory University. Lewis told the class of 2014 to be bold, courageous, stand up, and speak out. He framed his words by saying that when he was

a boy growing up in Alabama, he would often see segregation signs—white men, colored men, white women, colored women, and so on. He asked his parents and grandparents about the disparity and they would often say that this is just the way it is, don't get in the way, and don't get into trouble.

For Lewis, that advice he accepted from his well-intentioned family changed when he met Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Both of them, in his words, "inspired me to get in the way, to get into trouble . . . You must find a way to get in the way, you must find a way to get into trouble—good trouble, necessary trouble." [3] These are kingdom instructions. This is a call to social justice, to change the way things have always been when the system itself is broken and people suffer the consequences.

Moreover, this is what Jesus taught his disciples and challenged them to carry on after he was gone. It's no wonder they were afraid! Because we're talking about the difference between justice and charity, and justice is what gets you into trouble. Charity tries to alleviate the effects of injustice. Justice tries to eliminate what causes injustice in the first place. Both are important, and the Church has always excelled at charity. But it's justice that challenges the status quo and can lead to political confrontation. Jesus and the disciples knew the difference between charity and justice, which is why the disciples were afraid of Jesus' teachings and the consequences of those teachings. Because those teachings and the way Jesus passionately lived his life landed Jesus on a Roman cross.

Let's keep in mind that disciple means learner. And so Jesus' followers did their best to learn from him and to take his words to heart, especially the ones about God loving them so deeply that they need not fear the persecutions of the world. "And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." [4]

John Lewis grew up during an era when fear was so prevalent, and challenging the system was especially scary. Yet he learned from Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. to get into good, necessary trouble. The earliest disciples learned from Jesus—who also preached about getting into good, necessary trouble to lift up those most vulnerable. To do the hard work of justice. We can also say that Rosa Parks and Dr. King learned from Jesus and the Christian tradition that calls us to the hard work of justice. We can start to see the circles of influence that teachers have and how compelling calls for reforming unjust societal systems can stand the test of time. Because we need to be called back to the hard work, and being part of a faith community helps inspire us to work for change.

Robin Meyers maintains that Christianity grew at a remarkable pace after the death of Jesus because Christianity had an alternative lifestyle compared to what Rome offered, a lifestyle the disciples learned from Jesus. All the language today in Matthew about a man being set against his father and daughter against mother and one's foes being members of one's own household is about kingdom values. You never hear those who champion traditional family values using these Biblical verses because Jesus' first followers had to leave their families behind and Jesus himself left his family behind to show the world a different way. And you had better believe that not all of their families was pleased that they were off gallivanting around with Jesus with all his crazy notions and ideas about loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself and creating the kingdom of heaven on earth.

In fact, as historian Diana Butler Bass reminds us, "the new religion transformed people, giving even women, peasants, and slaves a meaningful ability to reorder their lives." [5] So it was hard for some families to see their loved ones go off and be part of a faith community with peasants and slaves and women. Some families were just not okay with their loved ones becoming followers of the Way and thus they rejected and ostracized their sons and daughters, parents, and friends. Which is part of what led the earliest Christian communities to be so close-knit

and familial. For many people, their faith community became their family. After all, the process to become a Christian took several years and you inevitably bonded over that time together. Christianity was considered an intentional choice with real consequences, a whole new way of life that was best learned in community; a process of spiritual formation and learning that took time and deep commitment.[6]

The earliest Christians were deeply communal. They cared for the sick during plagues when no one else would, refused to worship Caesar, stopped animal sacrifices, outlawed infanticide (particularly of daughters), threw open the doors of their house churches and underground assemblies to anyone who would come, redistributed wealth and held many things in common, and declared from the rooftops that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar.[7] This was so hard. But for them, the hard made it great.

And this amazing legacy of justice and charity, welcome and community is ours to continue in the Church today. How cool is that? We are the heirs of this amazing tradition to get into good trouble, necessary trouble. We get to do both charity and justice and call our society to consciousness when necessary, showing and telling that the world's values are not the only ones that matter. For a disciple is not above the teacher, and we are following in the footsteps of Jesus himself. At the end of the day, we get to work on the hard stuff side by side, knowing that the hard is what makes it great. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Matthew 10:24, NRSV.

[2] Lance Papp, Homiletical Perspective of Matthew 10:24-39 in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, 167.

[3] John Lewis, as quoted by Kimber Williams, in "Lewis urges grads toward engagement, activism," *Emory Report*, May 12, 2014, http://news.emory.edu/stories/2014/05/er_commencement_coverage/campus.html

[4] Matthew 10:30-31, NRSV.

[5] Diana Butler Bass, *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, 28.

[6] *Ibid*, 29.

[7] Robin Meyers, *The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus*, 47-48.