

Hoeing

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Betsy and I tried to get a jump on spring this year.

So in mid-March we flew to Nashville and drove to Asheville. We went to the Grand Ol Opry where we got to see the wonderful community of Country and Western musicians in action... we hiked in the Smokies, keeping our eyes out for bear... we foraged, with the help of a guide, on the Asheville side of the Blue Ridge Parkway... and we got to see the amazing gardens at the Biltmore, the grand home built by the Vanderbilts.

Even though New England can't quite figure out what season it is, I've been out in my garden this week and loving what it does for me... and I got thinking about how much Jesus relied on nature to deliver his teaching.

I finally planted my three cranberry viburnum and we have just set out the rest of the annuals. And the bright hot colors of spring are settling back down into mature greens and fragrant blossoms.

If we can guess at all about Jesus' spirit, he seemed to relish the natural world. He meditated at dawn in silent out of the way places. He fled to the wilderness after his baptism to test his own spirit. He used the day lilies as analogies for the beauty and splendor of life. And he taught in nature and about nature.

So I'd like to zoom out on him as a teacher and think about what made him unique. And then I want to zoom in on a particular parable. And finally I want to go to the movies with you and think about distraction and attention and what it means to be a disciple... in fact to be his disciple.

Let's zoom out on Jesus, as a teacher. Jesus was a reformer bringing his own sense of what Jewish spiritual reform looked like to the country villages. Read the gospels and you see both Jesus and the Pharisees in the early parts of the gospels. This is because the Pharisees, like Jesus, had a reform agenda. They both cared about the spiritual well being of the villages of Palestine.

The Pharisees, from what we know of the schooling that the apostle Paul received as a Pharisee, were focused on academic talent. They culled from the boys who studied with them the brightest and best who could remember the Torah and interpret it.

Their vision of heaven was of ... a place that replicated the academies and schools that they held. Heaven was ultimately a place where respectful study of the Torah took place, as on earth.

Maybe this reference to heaven gives you a clue about Jesus' themes and the way he taught. Think of the Lord's Prayer... may your will be done on earth as in heaven. The Pharisees focused on the mind (the study of Torah), Jesus didn't ignore the Torah, but he focused on the will. May your will be done. May change take place. Not may we study, but may we do. His heaven on earth (if we judge by the prayer itself) is a place of action, of provision, of forgiveness, of guidance through tribulation.

You might say that Jesus believed a very Jewish idea... that right relationship leads to right thinking. Correct your life and your thinking will follow.

And Jesus did not go for academic talent but for something else. For we see him watching fishermen and then inviting them to follow. These were not the brightest students... instead they had something else. They had a heart that believed.

Jesus, then, began his ministry by proclaiming the mercy of God and then seeing who really believed that mercy. He looked for those who were willing to follow, who could find what they believed about heaven here on earth. This is the zoom out. This made Jesus magnetic as a teacher... a combination of practicality and spirituality, a blend of head and heart... and above all an expectation that change would really take place.

I often find the essays of Rachel Naomi Remen compelling. She is a doctor whose Jewish sense of the sacred has often informed her practice of counseling those with cancer. I was especially moved this week as I read her essay called "How We See One another". She starts off by describing her relationship with her second cousin. Rachel says that as a teenager she was especially awkward and ungainly. Her cousin would take her to the Russian Tea Room in New York City and she would inevitably trip or spill her food badly. Yet some years later she presented as a very different person. Now trained in her field, tall and distinctive in dress, she again went to the Russian Tea Room with her cousin. But she realized that her cousin did not really see her as a different person, did not really believe that change could take place. And so, in her presence, she began to slip back into the persona of that awkward teenager, spilling her red wine, dribbling gravy down her dress. Once she upended her purse and everything in it spilled across the floor of that elegant space. And her cousin conspired with this, nodding gravely and never expecting the mature Rachel to show up. Maddening.

But Jesus truly believed change could take place. One of the iconic stories of Jesus' ministry (but by no means the only one) was of a woman with a perpetual flow of blood who reached out and touched him in the crowd. Jesus turned around, feeling something transpire within him, and asked who touched him... making his disciples think he had completely lost his marbles... by the way. And when he found the woman he listened compassionately while she told the long story of her fruitless therapies. He brought her into the light. He expected her to change and to stay healed.

May Your will be done on earth as in heaven. God's will? Not just understanding but growth, healing and change.

Okay, let's zoom in now.

A farmer had a piece of uncertain land and no time to run a team of oxen over it. It was gratuitous land and he wanted to see what it would grow. So he took a great bag of seed and he walked over the land, the rises and valleys, the stretches of fragrant earth and the places where bedrock threatened to break through... and he tossed seed liberally, everywhere, without any discrimination.

Here is a God unlike any we have seen. Instead of a God of prim and proper manners, a clear theology and a sense of where the chosen live and how they worship... here is a God who does not discriminate... at all!

Listen, said Jesus. Don't control, instead cultivate. Pay attention to the seed that has been thrown into your life... for some seed will land on a person who is bored and anxious. It will sit there a while and then the hungry birds will fly in and feast. Some seed will land on promising ground without much depth. Growth there will look good but the heat of summer will easily dry up these small seeds who have no source of nourishing water. Some seed will land among a

rich furrow of land, already populated by eager, straining weeds. And the last... well there are those who make the ground ready for the seed.

Listen, said Jesus. Don't control, instead cultivate.

What was the word in Jesus' time. What might it be for us?

Let's back to Rachel Naomi Remen's story. She was not just a doctor, she had been a patient with Crohn's disease. It is a very serious illness and the therapies had wreaked a great deal of havoc on her body. Finally a specialist asked her into his office. He asked her to tell him the whole story. And she did. It included surgeries during which she nearly died, cortisone and drug therapies that deeply altered her appearance, weakened bones. She told him the whole story. When she finished she listened for a word of healing. Instead she heard him ask... "are you still able to practice medicine... at all?"

But that's not the end of the story. Rachel let the doubt in his voice sink into her heart. She began to pull back and not accept opportunities to speak. Finally a colleague and friend asked her what was going on. And when he asked her to tell the story, the whole story that she had told the specialist, his response touched her in a very different place... a place of faith. "God, Rachel, he said... you are a warrior!"

What is the word? Jesus started his ministry by quoting Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The word was and is a word of courage, hope and deliverance to those who need to be reminded that they are included in the sacred circle of God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah, God's gracious gift of God's love to the world.

Thy Kingdom come, they will be done on earth as in heaven.

Maybe you like to go to a good summer movie. So let's draw some experiential connections between hearing the word and going to the movies.

Some people will go to the movies and when they walk out of the theater they will feel a bit wrung out, kind of like stale popcorn... and they will want to forget the movie right away. Some people will go to the movies and they will be deeply stirred by the theme of the movie but will find that they can't 'do something' with the theme. And so moved, they will let the word die away. Others will go to the movies and they will be constantly pulling their phone out of their pocket (to the annoyance of the ones who want to focus) and they will be updating their status and even commenting on the movie while it is going on. But there is a fourth group.

And here's the secret. This fourth group is made up of the three before it. For no-one is locked into a category. For we are called not to control but to cultivate an open heart to God. We are called to go hoeing, to prepare our hearts for the excitement and challenge of the Word that God is speaking to us... a word of restoration and deliverance into the covenant of grace, love and mercy that is the heart of the Jewish and Christian faiths.

Let's go back to our movie goers. Which of these movie goers are you most like? Stale popcorn, enthusiastic zealot, yes man or woman. The challenge for us modern folk is that we say yes to everything and thus say yes to nothing at all.

But if we are to flourish we need to stop, pay attention, hoe the ground of our hearts and listen for the one word that we are all created to hear...

Like the budding spring leaves, the opening blossoms, the presence of spring growth, we are drawn out by this word.

Like the patient hungry to hear just the right diagnosis we listen with bated breath.

Like the trekker who needs another orientation point we are hungry to know this one thing.

This one main thing. This one Word

Carl Sandberg... I love you for what you are but I love you more for what you are going to be. You are going forward toward something great. I am going with you and therefore I love.

This is the word of the gospel. It is a word of inclusion. Other words don't have to have the last word. In the end we need to center and quiet ourselves and hear this word from God. I love you.