

Attention, Curiosity, and the Beauty of Disruption

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

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Texts: Exodus 3.1-15;
Psalm 105.1-6, 23-26, 45c;
Romans 12.9-21;
Matthew 16.21-28

One of my favorite exercises that we do introducing Restorative Circles has to do with attention. During the 10-minute meditation we shift people's focus from what they are hearing to what they are feeling in different parts of their body. We do this for multiple reasons but one is to demonstrate that we really do have the capacity to control where we place our attention. We do this because for most of us – most of the time anyway – our attention is all over the place especially when we have some wide-open spaces.

I found myself curious about Moses out in those fields in our story today. Where did his mind go? Did he replay his haunting history back in Egypt? Or has he set that all aside as his new life in Midian takes all the space of his attention.

I know there are many days for me when I cannot see much beyond the demands that are right in front of me: the email box, the to-do list, trying to be faithful in my work, trying to be faithful at home, trying to stay up on what is happening in the world and be responsive to all of these needs. Sometimes it feels impossible to know what of all this is really and truly mine? What's my work? What's yours? What's Gods? Anybody with me on this? I recognized in this familiar story of Moses and the burning bush some helpful markers along the way.

The first has to do with attention – God's attention – and it connects to the word I shared with the children today. As Moses fled the scene back in Egypt leaving behind the Hebrew people who were suffering in slavery, I don't know whether Moses' attention ever goes back there. But I do know

about God's. The verse just before our passage tells us: "God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them."¹

I don't know what kind of suffering might be with us in this room today. I don't exactly what burdens you are carrying or what part of the world's suffering is right at the top of your heart. But from beginning to end our text proclaims that God takes notice when we suffer. In fact human suffering is like this magnetic pull on divine attention. Chapter three verse seven: "I have observed the misery of my people...I have heard their cry." It's repeated in verse nine: "The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I see how the Egyptians oppress them."

One of the most painful aspects of suffering is that feeling of being all alone in it. This text says "NO! You are NOT alone. God sees you." That's the first part of God's work - taking notice - paying attention. And the second part has to do with mobilizing for action. God does not just hear. God responds. Verse eight: "I have come down to deliver them..."

That's where God's work and our work begin to intersect. Before God can mobilize us as the hands and feet of divine response, God has to get our attention and that is no small task in the frenetic pace we live today. This story points to the place where God often calls to us and it's from the margins. The burning bush was not front and center. It tells us that Moses had to turn aside to see. It was on the periphery of his vision. The most critical piece was the curiosity inside of Moses that caused him to stop what he was doing to shift his attention and to go check this thing out. It's in the course of investigation that he finds himself on holy ground face to face with God. This is where Moses learns that when God says "**I** will deliver them..." - the "I" means "you."

But before you let that weight hang too heavily, please hear the "you" the way my southern relatives who are here today sometimes say it: "y'all". The liberation of God's people is not being laid at Moses' feet alone. First of all God is going with him and will give Moses the words he needs to say and the courage he needs to carry. God will give him a partner in the person of Aaron and eventually will give to Moses a whole company of elders who will labor with him. He does not go alone.

¹ Exodus 2.:25, NRSV

I want to tell you about two different conversations I had this week with people who are paying attention to the periphery and whose curiosity to explore have brought them onto holy ground as the hands and feet of God. The first was a phone call from someone who had come through the Restorative Circle training I mentioned before. If you aren't familiar with it a Restorative Circle is a dialogue process for people in conflict to help them hear what is the heart of the matter and then to find ways to move forward. Amy, who lives in Indiana, came to one of our early trainings. She's been back multiple times. She's been spreading seeds for years and all of a sudden things are taking off. She called for support as she was moving through a bit of fear about it all. An entire school district wanting her to train their teachers, a business group wanting her expertise, a Christian Reformed Church wanting this Methodist for a part time position on their staff. Even if she feels a wave of fear with each new opportunity she knows that God is walking with her and equipping her for this work. In a climate where divisions and conflict are burning communities to the ground, a training several years ago a whole state over caught her attention and as she went to check it out she found her path to being the hands and feet of God.

The second conversation is connected to someone in a group I am part of that Pastor Gordon has been convening since last fall. It's a group trying to listen to what people living on the margins in our community are grappling with and to stand with them for justice. One of the concerns that came on our radar very quickly was the needs of our immigrant community. At the same time that we look to speak as advocates to legislators (and there is a great need for that work right now this very week!), we also want to be responsive to the very practical needs of these people living in the system as it is.

That's the heart of this person I spoke with this week who gave me permission to share his story but not his name. As he went to investigate what the needs really are he discovered that people needed help keeping their appointments with USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services). The closest field office where these appointments and hearings are held is all the way over in Detroit. People didn't have easy ways to get there. Some people didn't have any way to get there. So he started organizing rides. Word has spread and he's getting requests for one to two

rides a week. Clearly there is a gift to those receiving these rides which is why the word has been spreading so quickly. What he talked to me about was the gift to those providing these rides. Their eyes and hearts have been broken wide open.

Is it disruptive? You better believe it. Just look at the volunteers flooding into Houston or the houses of worship opening their doors in that region. MJ Khan is the president of the Islamic Society of Greater Houston and their six mosques have been open for shelter. When he suggested that some of those volunteers take a break from relief efforts to sleep, they told him “we can’t sleep until these people are in their homes.”²

When we are attentive to the periphery – when we are curious enough to lean in and listen – God will enlist us as hands and feet. Yes – there is a disruption that comes from this attentiveness but even more there is great mutual blessing and that is where the beauty is found.

I know that the needs of the world are great. Part of my prayer for us today is that we will leave here not overwhelmed by the depth of human suffering or the scope of the work before us. My prayer is that we will be inspired by the depth of God’s compassion for us and the scope of God’s vast network of hands and feet – we are just one small part. Every time I find my place and my piece in this vast network I want to be fearless as I step into it - even if I am still trembling as I go.

I want to share with you a rather unusual prayer for blessing today. It’s a contemporary song that I hope can infuse us with energy as we remember who it is that goes with us, and before us and behind us. Because it is only as we keep our eyes on God that we have any hope of stepping into the places God is calling us. The song is called *Fearless*.³

² Link to article about the Islamic community response in Houston: <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-08-29/after-harvey-hundreds-find-refuge-houston-area-mosques>

³ Link to song Fearless by Jasmine Murray: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yqtf71mLLwY>