

In Which We Work a Little Too Hard

1 Samuel 13: 4-14; Luke 9: 28-36

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I. Introduction

After a long and rich relationship with the *Saturday Evening Post*, in 1963 Norman Rockwell broke off his contract because the *Post* had been increasingly uncomfortable with the political nature of some of Norman Rockwell's paintings. They wanted him painting those good, wholesome American paintings and he started getting more and more edgy in his work. And so, he didn't renew his contract and he went to work for a magazine called *Look*. And 50 years ago this week he published in that magazine a painting that was called *The Problem We All Live With*. It was a painting that spoke about the evils of segregation and showed us a six-year-old African American girl named Ruby Bridges being escorted by four U.S. Marshalls as she went to integrate the school system in New Orleans.

One of the things that's wonderful about the painting is that Ruby isn't doing anything dramatic. The whole picture is focused on her. You see the marshals but the painting cuts off their heads, you just see their bodies, and Ruby is the focus. And she is this wonderful, calm, very centered presence as she walks to school like any other little six-year-old girl, dressed in a lovely white dress, carrying her notebook and her pencil, as she walks by this wall on which racial epithets are written and there's a tomato that has clearly been thrown at her on the ground. And what becomes obvious is that Ruby, just by virtue of who she is, is changing the nature of the world around her. She doesn't have to do anything dramatic. She, just by virtue of who she is, is changing the system.

Every January we do a sermon series that is aimed at folks that aren't regular churchgoers, which may be some of you. It's intended to be a little bit more welcoming to people who may not have a church background and be a little bit easier to engage. And this month we had been spending the Sundays looking at the stories of Winnie the Pooh and unpacking some of the wonderful wisdom that A.A. Milne offers us in those stories.

II. Being vs Doing

Like Ruby Bridges, Pooh has a gift for making things happen just by being who he is. He is often surrounded by friends in the forest who are very busy and very purposeful doing important work, and often, very little gets accomplished by them. Pooh, on the other hand, does very little and yet things seem to fall in place when Pooh is there. There's a wonderful story in which all of the animals are looking for one of Rabbit's very small friends and relations, a little relation called Small, who is a bug. And so, they coordinate, they pull everybody together, they map out who's exploring what part of the forest and they all go out to do this very important work. And Pooh, of

course, trips and falls along the way and as he picks himself up, there's Small crawling on his back and he's discovered Small just by being where he is.

In a quote from one of the movies, Pooh says, "People say that nothing is impossible, but I do nothing every day." Think about it, you'll get there.

See, that's a helpful reminder, I think, because for most of us, doing nothing is impossible. We live in a society that values our doing infinitely more than it values our being and we find ourselves being defined and self-defining by what we do. We are generally rewarded for the amount of activities in which we engage frankly often regardless of whether or not those activities actually accomplish anything of substance. Amen? We are always being urged by the people around us to do more and take on more activity. And to not be engaged in some sort of activity drives most of us a little bit crazy. This is particularly true when we find ourselves in situations that are uncomfortable or unfamiliar and our natural reaction is to want to engage in some sort of doing. And ultimately, that's what this beautiful story of the transfiguration that we heard this morning.

If any of you have ever wondered, the beautiful window that we have in the back of the church there is of this transfiguration story. And in this story, Jesus takes his disciples -- Peter, James, and John -- up on Mount Horeb and they have this incredibly powerful epiphany, this experience of God as Jesus is transformed into this radiant figure clothed in white and accompanied by Moses and Elijah. And it's an awe-inspiring moment, a moment in which their whole perception of who Jesus is and what they have been doing is changed. And Peter, in classic Peter fashion, doesn't know what to do with that, and so his immediate reaction is, "Let's do something. Let's build something. Let's build a house for you and Elijah and Moses. Let's engage in some activity because that at least gives us the illusion that we have things under control." And of course, there's this wonderful response by God in which God overshadows the mountain and says, "This is my Son. Listen to him. It's not about what you do. Just be in the moment. Listen." Activity in other words is not always the answer.

III. Waiting

Now our endless quest for activity actually presents a couple of theological problems, the first of which is that we begin to understand that our value is tied to what we do and the good news of the Gospel message is our value isn't tied to what we do. Our value comes solely from the fact that we are beloved children of God. Nothing we can do can add to that or take away from that. We are in our very essence beloved children of God and that is what makes us of infinite value. If our value is dependent on the things we do, that's going to rise and fall faster than the stock market because sometimes we're very productive and other times not, and all of it doesn't matter. What matters is that God has created and loved us at our very core.

The second heresy that we often fall into is that our activities, even our good activities that are aimed at building up the kingdom, are responsible for building up the

kingdom. And dear friends, they're not. God is the only one who builds up the kingdom. It is God's work that changes the world. And if we are wise, we place ourselves in harmony with that work and allow God to do some of it through us. But we don't change the world. God changes the world.

Janet Craswell and I were at the annual Board of Ordained Ministry exam for new pastors this week, and one of our new pastors was asked what the mission of the United Methodist Church is. Well, the mission is -- do you all know this -- to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. You should have that locked in your heads, by the way. But this candidate framed the response exactly correctly theologically. She did not say "to make disciples for the transformation of the world." She said our mission is to help God make disciples for the transformation of the world. Do you hear the difference there? I don't make disciples. You don't make disciples. I've tried; it doesn't work. None of us makes disciples. God makes disciples. And if we place ourselves in the right situation, we can help be tools for God in that process, but God is always the actor. And being in that place often requires not rushing to pursue our own agenda or even what we perceive to be God's agenda.

We live in a culture that values highly decisiveness and activity. We look to our leaders to make quick and decisive judgments as they move us forward. And quick and decisive action at points is incredibly important and helpful. If you are in a battle, acting quickly and decisively can save lives including your own. If you are going to save somebody from a burning house, you're going to need to act quickly and decisively. But in most cases, rushing out to do what we think needs to be done often gets us in more problems than not.

That's what our Hebrew scripture lesson is about today from Samuel. King Saul has just been made king, and remember that the Israelites at this point in history were all functioning essentially as independent tribes, and now for the first time they have come together under one united leader and King Saul has started to try to push back the Philistine encroachment on Israelite land and the Philistines of course come out in full force to fight against Saul. And Saul has gathered this fragile, new nation together to try to oppose the Philistines, and everybody is scared. Everybody is nervous about what is going to happen with the Philistines and they don't know what their future is and they're looking to Saul to make it clear.

Now, Saul knows what he has to do which is he's supposed to wait for Samuel to come and offer the offerings to God to bring God's blessing on their endeavor and for Samuel to help discern how they move forward against the Philistines. But Samuel hasn't showed up and Saul is getting really, really nervous, and his people are saying, "You've got to do something right now." And so, Saul gets pushed by their anxiety and his own anxiety to go ahead and make the sacrifice to God himself.

And of course, immediately as soon as he's done this, Samuel shows up and says, "What were you thinking? You had direction. You were instructed to wait until I got here. And because you failed to wait, God is not going to be able to use you to

build up the kingdom of Israel. Your reign is done and God will raise up someone who will wait and listen for God's word before rushing into whatever decisions needs to be made. Your impatience, your lack of trust that God is at work has cost you the kingship." Now that sounds harsh but Samuel's point is God needs a leader who is willing to follow God's direction and not make up the direction himself. Often our leaders are interestingly most effective because they don't act quickly. Good leaders wait to see how the Holy Spirit is moving in any given situation.

This is what made Dr. King such a powerful and successful civil rights leader: he didn't always take the first opportunity to engage in consciousness-raising action. He waited for the right moment. Rosa Parks was not the first opportunity that he had to begin a bus boycott in Montgomery. She was the right person at the right time. Nor was Ruby Bridges the first opportunity to integrate the schools in New Orleans. She was the right person at the right time. If those issues had been forced too soon, they would have not have created the change that they did, but Dr. King and the other civil rights leaders of those years had the wisdom to know when to act and when to wait.

It is very hard for us to wait. We're trying so hard to do so much and often the answer is to take a deep breath and see where the Holy Spirit is going to move. This is, of course, one of the enormously frustrating things that we all experience when we're talking about life transitions, and we're in the middle of a wonderful series of classes on Wednesday evening about how to engage in life transitions well. Well, what's one of the primary gifts that we have to bring that? It's the ability to wait. What makes it so hard to sit at the bed of a dying loved one? It's that we can't do anything. We can't change what's happening there by virtue of our action. What's required of us is to sit and be present and know that the Holy Spirit is always at work, and often at work through us even when we don't appear to be doing anything, even when it doesn't feel like we are doing anything.

I was in conversation with one of our parishioners yesterday who was sharing with me how blessed he and his family had been by Drema McAllister-Wilson's presence with them. What Drema did was just be there. She didn't have to do anything. She didn't have to make it all right. She had to be there.

Transitions, life transition, always happens at their own pace. You can't force transitions. You can't rush them. The best you can do is align yourself with them so that the Holy Spirit can start to move through you.

IV. Conclusion

In the final Winnie the Pooh story, Christopher Robin and Pooh were talking and Christopher Robin says, "What I like doing best is nothing." "How do you do nothing?" asked Pooh after he had wondered for a long time. "Well, it's when people call out at you just as you're going off to do it, what are you going to do Christopher Robin? And

you say, oh, nothing, and then you go and do it." "Oh, I see," said Pooh. "This is a nothing sort of thing that we're doing right now," said Christopher Robin. "Oh, I see," said Pooh again. It just means going along, listening to all the things you can't hear and not bothering so much.

In a world of frenetic scurrying and an endless seeking to be active and of value, Pooh offers us a good, helpful piece of wisdom. If we can just try going along and listening for the things that we can't hear and maybe trusting that even if we don't feel as though we're accomplishing anything, the Holy Spirit is at work in and through and around us.

Amen.