

I am just back from a restorative, life-giving vacation. It feels as if the arc of a whole life was lived in the duration of those weeks. I spent a lot of time with Michael and the kids, read a mountain of books, hung out in the North Woods and saw a wolf (which was a huge thrill), and traveled back home to Detroit. And though I didn't know it when it was happening, the vacation provided time and space for some real insight into this morning's passage from James that reminds us to: *be doers of the Word...not hearers who forget, but doers who act.*

The occasion for the Detroit visit was the memorial service for John Fredenburgh, the priest of my home parish growing up. Nativity Episcopal Church was the center of my family's life. It was a small but mighty community mostly made up of kids, and young parents trying to raise those kids. And in the center of it all – John – a physically large, jovial, hilarious, slightly irreverent priest who gave a lot of sermons that referenced Bob Dylan lyrics. Over the decades of my childhood, John was there in times of hilarity and in times of heartbreaking crisis. For decades he sent birthday cards to every, single parishioner – kids and adults – always using the same notecard that pictured Nativity's altar and the surrounding gross, yellow carpet. John taught my confirmation class and I remember him asking his son Cole to read a passage from a psalm for the class – the passage was something like, “take these herbs, O Lord,” only Cole read it, “take these **H**erbs, O Lord,” and John, a very big man perched perilously atop a miniature Sunday School chair, laughed so hard that he fell over, and continued laughing on the floor. My Mom remembers John wearing this big goofy hat every Easter morning, and, standing at the front door, handing a daffodil to every person that entered, saying, “Happy to ya’!” Or the time, when I was 9 and I asked John why we call it “Good Friday” when it was actually a terrible day because Jesus died on that day. John used our conversation as the basis for his sermon that year, and said that he loved me, in front of the whole congregation.

John was a great man for a million small reasons and it was one of the greatest honors of my life to preside and preach at his memorial service – to stand in that most holy of sanctuaries surrounded by all my childhood friends, now, too, in their 40s and 50s. What occurred to me in preparing for that day was how, when I think of what it means to be live life as a Christian, I think of John. And it's not because he was a priest, or in any way perfect, or even virtuous. He was a human being, after all, prone to all the same insecurities, mistakes of judgment, and insensitivities as the rest of us. But still, the missteps and errors of judgment never overshadowed the accumulated small moments of goodness spanned out over his lifetime. John knew that the task of dedicating a life devoted to the following of Jesus is a jumbled tangle of both human frailty and God's grace. The writer Harriet Beecher Stowe once wrote, “To be really great in little things, to be truly noble and heroic in the insipid details of everyday life, is a virtue so rare as to be worthy of canonization.” And maybe that was the key to living the Gospels that

John figured out for himself – that the Christian life is really made up of an unending stream of what we do in little, ordinary moments – moments in which we are able to make a good choice, or do the right thing, or feel our hearts fill up with gratitude, or glean for ourselves some kind of deep compassion or understanding, or stand up and challenge something that’s not right. And even more than that, that these actions spanned out over a life time are fueled by what we feel in our hearts.

During a BBC interview near the end of his life, Albert Schweitzer was asked why he left his influential career and comfortable life to go to the wilds of Africa. He responded, *I have decided to make my life my argument*. It was indeed a prophetic response, as evidenced by the number of times it has been quoted ever since. For in those nine words, Schweitzer managed to embody one of the primary theological teachings of the New Testament: *how* we live our lives – the decisions we make, the actions we choose, the plans we lay – is the inseparable twin of what we believe. As Christians we are called to boldly profess our faith in Jesus Christ with both words and deeds, in both creed and action. The Christian life attains a kind of wholeness and integrity when faith and deeds cohere in some kind of unity, a back-and-forth that keeps the other renewed and alive and growing. What we believe informs the decisions we make. And, conversely, the actions of our lives can give us new experiences of the living God in our midst, experiences that deepen our understanding of truth and further shape our set of beliefs. Simply, the Christian life lived fully and intently can be understood as a dance, an inter-play, a symbiotic relationship between our belief and our actions.

This morning we read in James, “Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves...(be) not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing.” And similarly in Mark’s Gospel, “Listen to me,” Jesus tells the crowds, “and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” What matters, Jesus tells the crowds, what really matters is the heart, the seat of the will, where decisions are made about one’s life and one’s neighbors. The condition of the heart, whether debased or pure, is far more critical in determining our success in living out God’s commandments than any other thing. As we absorb into our hearts what is around us – our work and labor, our relationships, our culture, our experiences, our religion – what is most important is how the heart takes it all in and how it chooses, in response, to act.

I think that we tend to make things harder for ourselves than is necessary. Following Jesus, living according to the Gospels many times feels beyond us, for people more virtuous than ourselves. We have so very low expectations of our own capacity to be a real Christian. But there’s an important sign-post in this morning’s scripture that ministers to this sense of futility and assures us of our very real capacity to live faithfully to the Gospel. This summer Michael and I offered a very short course on “Nature and Spirituality” for a week at the YMCA’s Camp du Nord near Ely. On one of the days we offered an article written almost 35 years ago by the

theologian and poet Wendell Berry entitled, “Think Little.” Berry’s point, simply, is that ordinary people like you and me can begin to solve big environmental problems by thinking little, that massive and significant change does not start with the big project, or the big money – but rather with a collection of small, personal actions. “It is detail,” writes Berry, “and it is personal behavior. While governments are studying and finding and organizing their Big Thoughts, nothing is actually getting done. But the citizen who is willing to Think Little, and accepting the discipline of that, to go ahead on his or her own, is already solving the problem.” Berry goes on to explore how little daily actions like gardening, or generating less trash, or cutting back on energy use has the cumulative effect of big change over time.

So maybe, we practice “Thinking Little” from a Christian perspective, looking at little acts, small attempts at aligning our belief and our action as having a cumulative effect over time. When back home this summer I visited my former congregation of St. Clare’s in Ann Arbor and I remembered a story from the time I served there. St. Clare’s has – for almost 40 years - shared its sanctuary and office space with Temple Beth Emeth. The two congregations had cohabitated together nicely for nearly a decade when they decided it was time to renovate the sanctuary and meeting spaces to better accommodate growth and changing needs. As the project neared completion a huge argument broke out. The topic? Commemorative plaques. The Temple members wanted to post brass plaques around the new building, honoring the most generous benefactors. The church members thought that gifts should be given to the glory of God and not for public recognition. So the battle lines were drawn, and the meeting degenerated into shouting and accusations. At the meeting’s climax, the matriarch of the church, Carol Plummer, stood up and accused the rabbi of being selfish and a bad example and stormed out of the room.

A few days later Carol asked to meet with the rabbi privately. Once seated in his office she came to her point: she was deeply sorry for the way she had acted, she regretted what she said, and she asked the rabbi for his forgiveness. The rabbi was taken aback – sure, arguments happened all the time in the Temple, and most times people reconciled, just like in any other community. But the way those things happened were just different -- no less ethical or caring, but just different. The rabbi, stuttering and feeling a bit uncomfortable, accepted the apology. Carol gathered her things and left. Weeks later the rabbi asked the rector of the church why Carol had done what she did. The rector replied simply, “Because she’s a Christian.”

Carole died at the age of 94 and her funeral was truly a community event – one that required Ann Arbor police directing traffic and auxiliary seating with sound from the sanctuary piped in. But what was remembered at her memorial service was not a huge professional career, or dynamic Board of Director membership, or financial success. What was shared was a million small stories like this one – ordinary moments to which Carol applied her Christian practice to the best of her ability.

Be doers of the Word...not hearers who forget, but doers who act. I have often wondered if St. Francis of Assisi was paraphrasing the letter to James when he said, “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” The path of faithfulness is a rocky road, and yet God does not expect of us what is beyond our reach. A life lived with full and content hearts, a life lived with integrity, made up of millions of moments of discernment and action, of grace and humility, of good choices and holy words is the vision God has for us – and he offers us this in return: freedom and blessing, ours for the taking. AMEN.