

***Freedom: 12-Step Spirituality for Everyone Who Struggles******Step 12: Pass It On***

Luke 13:10-17

I would guess that most of us have had some experience with Mormon missionaries. If you haven't ever talked with one of them, you can at least identify them by sight. No matter where they are in the world—Africa, Asia, Europe, the United States—Mormon missionaries, young people with fresh faces, white shirts and skinny ties, usually on bicycles, are recognizable immediately. Spending a year as a missionary is a rite of passage for Mormon young people. It's often the year in between graduation from high school and the start of college. Students pay for the privilege of going out and doing this work for their church. And there's not much about being a missionary that's easy or fun. Those kids have stories about getting mugged or bitten by rabid dogs; even more stories about doors getting slammed in their faces. They don't choose where they go; *The Book of Mormon* creates a whole musical story about a kid who hoped he'd get sent to Orlando, and instead ends up in Uganda.

What you may not know about Mormon missionaries is that if you measure it in terms of conversions, they have a terrible success rate. For a whole year of working ten hours a day, seven days a week, the average number of converts a missionary reports back is five. Of those five, the retention rate is about 25%. That means that for each young missionary the LDS Church sends out to live abroad under difficult conditions, and talk to people all day every day about their religion, the Church gets one or two new, long-term members. That's it.

There must be a better system for growing the movement, or some other reason for making that year of missionary service the centerpiece of being raised in the Mormon tradition. And there is another reason. The people who get converted by that year of talking every day about their faith are the *missionaries*. With some exceptions of course, the young adults who spend a year talking to people about who God is and what God has done come home more convinced of their own faith, whether anyone else has believed them or not.

There is no better way to learn something than to teach it. No faster way to cement your familiarity with a new route home than to show it to someone else. No more sure way to hold onto a piece of insight important to you than to share it.

The 12th and final step of the Alcoholics Anonymous journey toward freedom and wholeness goes like this: "Having had a spiritual awakening, we tried to carry this message to others." I hear in those words an echo, a refrain of Jesus' last words to his disciples: "Now you go and make disciples," he said. "Baptize them. Teach them the things I've taught you." (Matthew 28:19-20)

Did Jesus say that to his disciples for the purpose of building a bigger Church? Maybe. That's how the Christian Church has always interpreted what we call the Great Commission. But that's not really consistent with the way Jesus lived his life. He didn't seem to focus on big audiences. His own religious tradition—Judaism—has never been big on convincing others to join them. I wonder if Jesus' instruction—Go make disciples—wasn't instead his best advice to the disciples for how to hold on to the inspiration and sense of purpose they'd found in their too-short three years next to him. How to deepen that feeling they had, that something important had shifted for them. How to move forward, instead of rolling back into old habits, life as it had always been before. *Go tell someone else about what God has*

*done for you*, Jesus said. That's how your sense of God becomes more real. It's how you hold onto your own change.

Living a healed, transformed life can be an elusive, sort of slippery thing. We've heard stories of miraculous, documented, physical cures. Cancer occasionally just disappears. Someone who has been blind their whole life suddenly can see. Maybe you've experienced something like that yourself. But more often the things we need to find freedom from are not so clearly defined as either here or gone. Even if I've had a moment of enlightenment, there is something comforting in that habit that I know is unhealthy for me, and it keeps calling me back. The same old fear and worries have a way of seeping back into my mind in the middle of the night. My lifelong pattern of gossip, or blaming other people, or getting too angry too quickly, can seem gone and then it's right there again, coaxing me back into old, familiar ways. It turns out that healing isn't always a once-and-for-all-time thing.

There's a reason that Alcoholics Anonymous folks refer to themselves as "recovering"—not recovered—alcoholics. They know that every day they will confront the same temptations that got them into trouble before. That they have to go back, every day of their lives, to the steps that led them and will lead them again to freedom from their addiction. This is one of those steps: Help someone else.

It's actually kind of a spiritual principle: You don't really understand something deep down until you give it away. Pass the light you've received on to somebody else. Not someday, after you get your life together. Not eventually, when you might be perfectly prepared. Now, while you're still in process. Now, when you're still flawed, not perfect at all. When you're not sure you're strong enough to manage your own questionable life one more day, find someone who needs to hear what you *can* remember about what got you through your worst day. When you're not sure at all that anything has actually changed, find someone who's life is *really* messed up and say, "Me too." When you've forgotten what faith even feels like, tell the story of the one moment when you *were* sure. That's what will remind you—convince you—that God has come to you before, and that God will come to you again. Helping someone else by telling them about the holiness you've seen—even if it's been just an incomplete glimpse—is how you hold onto that vision for yourself. D.T. Niles, the evangelist who spent his life in the leper colonies in Hawaii, said, "Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread."

The story that we read this morning from Luke's Gospel, about the bent-over woman, is a story about an imperfect healing. This woman, Luke says, had spent eighteen years stooped over. She couldn't stand up straight. Osteoporosis is probably what her diagnosis would be today. Eighteen years is a long time to stare at the ground. Imagine how her view of the world changed when Jesus healed her and she was able to stand up fully. For the first time in almost twenty years, she could look straight into the eyes of a friend, or her child. She could see the sky and what kind of weather was coming, for the first time in decades. The whole world was now in her line of sight—not just the small patch of dirt underneath her feet. It must have been amazing, liberating, wonderful!

But what did she see around her when she stood up? All beauty? A world that was rejoicing with her? Hardly. You know, in the Gospel stories, almost every time Jesus healed someone, it made someone else angry. This time was no exception. Nice healing, Jesus, they said; but today was the wrong day to do it. Any other day of the week would have been fine, but today—today healings are not allowed. You might think you did a good thing for this woman, but you have to do these things the right way! In some way, it's as if those right-thinking men in the room were bent over too—looking down instead of up, seeing only the small patch of ground they'd been standing on for a long time.

What this healed woman saw in that room when she stood up straight and looked into the other people's faces was anger. Resentment. Ugliness. Maybe she went home and found her kids still fighting with each other. All those years she'd imagined the beauty she was missing. Now that she could look up, she saw that the litter and dirt that she'd thought was just there under her feet actually stretched all the way to the horizon. The big world she could see now was no more perfect than the little world she'd been confined in all those years. Her back may have been un-bent, but her whole life was not straightened out, by any means.

And still, she said, "Look, I'm standing. This is what Jesus, the healer, did for me."

And then, I'd like to think, she went out and told the story again. And again. Maybe she kept telling it to everyone she saw who was bent over—literally or figuratively—just like she had been. And every time she told it, I imagine, she stood up a little straighter, found a little more strength in her back than she had realized was there.

Sue Foyle and I led a group this summer through a program called the Parent Project. It was a class for parents who feel like they're failing as parents, because their children are out of control. There were parents whose kids don't go to school, or don't sleep all night, or don't come home at all. Kids who are using drugs. Kids who fight all the time. There were parents in the class whose children have been taken away from them by the courts. Over the twelve weeks of the class, we heard the parents' stories. It's how they helped each other, by telling their stories—not of their great successes, because there weren't many. The stories that helped most, the stories that everyone stopped and listened to, were told by the people who had struggled most, and who were still struggling. "I was addicted to drugs too," the most powerful stories began. "I'm clean now, but I have to work at it every day." Or, "We got through a big fight in my family yesterday. I'm not sure what will happen tomorrow, but today we're OK."

12-step meetings are full of those kinds of stories. In fact, that's all meetings are. Stories that are as much about failure and ugliness as they are about success and beauty. Stories that remind both the listeners *and the person talking* that healing is something that happens, most of the time, in stops and starts, backward and forward, with lots of struggles along the way. That all of us—*all of us*—are still mostly full of imperfection. That the moments we get it right are pretty much pure grace.

There is no greater healing power in the world than that kind of story. Your story.

Telling the story of what God has done for you is not something you do only if you're a star, or only after you've got every part of your life together. You tell the story of how God has found you because the telling itself will help save your life. And at the same time, it just might save someone else's.