

We Make the Road by Walking: The Crooked Road to Freedom

Deuteronomy 8:1-4

In a book called *Art and Fear*, there's a story about a ceramics teacher who divided his students into two groups at the beginning of the semester. He told the group sitting on one side of the studio that they were going to be graded on the quantity of their work: if they produced fifty pounds of pots they'd get an A, for forty pounds they'd get a B, etc.. On the other side of the studio were the students who would be graded on the *quality* of their work: their grade would be based on the one best piece of pottery they made during the term.

When the semester ended, the instructor noticed an interesting thing: the best pieces—the ones with the highest *quality*—were made by the students who were sitting on the *quantity* side of the classroom. It turned out that while they were busy making pot after pot, they got better at their work. They were experimenting, learning from their mistakes, improving as they just stayed at it, not looking for perfection at all. On the other side of the room, the students who carefully planned and refined each pot worked on a few pieces during the semester, so they got less practice and so they didn't improve much.

This is an example of a principle that has become a mantra in Silicon Valley—that successful people take action quickly, fail fast, learn from their mistakes, and keep going. There are many examples. Did you know that Starbucks was originally designed to be an Italian coffee shop, with menus printed mostly in Italian, only opera music playing in the background, and no chairs? Its first stores failed miserably. Starbucks has become the formula we know today—which, remarkably, seems to work no matter where you go—through hundreds of experiments, adjustments and revisions.

But here's the thing, in every example: those people who are turning great pots or selling millions of cups of coffee or perfecting cell phone technology are not getting in and getting out of their work quickly. They may be with their projects for as long as it takes to get it right. It took a whole semester for those taking action and learning from the mistakes they make quickly, but they stay ceramics students to make one good piece of pottery; it has taken Starbucks years to reach a successful formula for its stores. It's a long road from the creation of an idea to its realization; often there are many, many failures along the way.

What every entrepreneur or writer or artist asks him or herself along the way, with almost every failed experiment, is: Do we keep going? Is this vision, this idea, big enough to warrant the cost of this work? Is it worth what I'm putting into it, and what I'm asking other people around me to pay with their time or their money or this part of their lives?

Moses must have asked himself these questions a thousand times as he led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness, toward freedom--the promised land that he trusted was at the other end of their journey. Forty years they were out there, the Bible story goes. Forty years—which means *a very, very long time*. Long enough for the original travelers to have children and for those children to grow up and have children of their own. Forty years in the *wilderness* means enough time to confront a lot of dangers: hunger, thirst, blisters on their

feet, fear. Fear that their supplies would run out, that the patches on their tents would not last through one more storm, that the food that somehow dropped from heaven would stop appearing.

And maybe their biggest fear: that there *was* no promised land at the other end of the road. They were out there so long that they sometimes forgot why they had left home. They lost track of where they were headed. It wasn't always clear that they were taking the most direct route to any place, or that they weren't just walking in circles. And in fact, it wasn't a straight line across the desert; the road was crooked, full of switch-backs and dead ends. Failed experiments and hard-learned lessons were their landscape, in view far more often than anything that looked like the promise of milk and honey.

This sounds like church to me. It sounds like the path of a group of people who are walking together, staying together, investing time and money and energy into building the kingdom of God's justice and love in a particular place—through a lot of moments when that seems like an impossible—or even a ridiculous--project. Like there never will be enough money to get there. Like we will all get old and tired long before this vision could happen. Like we're not even 100% sure where we're going, anyway.

Moses stood in front of those tired, worn-out, cynical people more than once—maybe dozens of times over those forty years—and said, “I know. I know all you can see right now is wilderness, that there isn't even a dot on the horizon that looks like promised land. But do you remember that you have felt like this before? Remember when you were sure we were going to starve and manna from heaven fell out of the sky? Or when it looked like we were going to die for sure if water didn't appear? Every time—*every time*—God has shown up to give us what we needed in that moment. And it will happen again—and maybe again and again—until we get there...no matter how long it takes.”

Moses wasn't just a leader; he was a saint. He never got to that promised land himself. That's what saints do; they live their lives as though it's less important what happens to them than it is that the vision moves a step closer to being accomplished. They live in a way that makes the rest of us who are watching remember why it was important to come out into the wilderness in the first place.

This church has a lot of saints in its memory. I'm thinking about the energy of Margaret Powell—Margaret who ran fast out of the church parking lot every Sunday so that she could get to the homes of visitors with a loaf of home-baked bread. A whole bunch of you have told me that Margaret is the reason you came back a second time. I'm thinking about the courage of Jan Grodeon, who was never afraid to stand up and say, “Remember we are Methodists. That means we do things differently.” I'm thinking about the humility of John Rhoades, who stood and sang with the choir for almost sixty years, and still some of you said after his memorial service last week, “I had no idea he had a Ph.D.”

These and so many more. Some of those saints are in this sanctuary this morning, and some of them are across the courtyard teaching Sunday School. You have been here Sunday after Sunday—not only for worship but to make coffee and set up tables. You have been here on Wednesday mornings and Friday mornings and Thursday nights. You have cooked, you have

knit, you have made phone calls and folded letters and sold scrip and fixed sprinkler heads. You have come back and done it again when it was easy to remember what's important about the church's work, and you have done it even when it was not so easy.

Why?

You have done it because of a vision—a vision that the Campbell United Methodist Church will be a signpost at the corner of Hamilton Avenue and Winchester Blvd.—a sign that says “this is what the loving, inclusive, generous, courageous kingdom of God looks like”. This is our promised land. And even if we *never* see it fully accomplished, it's worth staying on the road for.

This week you received another letter from the Stewardship Committee, asking you to bring with you to worship next week the card on which you have written down your financial pledge for 2015. We've asked you to increase what you will give to the church in the next year. I know that people have stood in this pulpit for years and asked you the same thing. I know that sometimes it feels easy to say 'yes' and sometimes it feels impossible. I trust you to make the right decision.

Here's what I know for myself: Shortly after I came to this church a few months ago, I began to give to the church's work. I'm a tither; I am committed to giving away ten percent of my income every year. But I held back a little in my gifts to the church, reserving part of my tithe for other causes I also believe in and give to. When I offer my pledge card next week, it will include a full ten percent of my salary. I will do it in part because I have asked you to make a similar increase, and it seems only fair that I should do the same thing. But I will do it mostly because I see the commitments you have made. You inspire me, every week, with your faith in God and in one another. In just four months, you have become saints in my life, the people who remind me, over and over again to keep trying, to keep walking. With our gifts we honor God, and we honor one another. This place is full of saints.