

"Attention"

The Reverend Anna Dickson

Date: February 4, 2024



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

The story says that, in the morning, while it was still very dark - a morning that came after a long ministry day for Jesus and his first four disciples, a morning that came after being confronted with the overwhelming need in the crowd that surrounded Jesus and hemmed him into Simon Peter's home, after a long day of offering healing to God's people - Jesus, the next morning, "while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed."

I bet you've heard a sermon or two about this. Or perhaps read a devotional about Jesus removing himself to find a quiet place to pray. About the spiritual discipline of putting your oxygen mask on before helping others do the same. Typically, it's taken as a model that he gives us for our spiritual lives - that if Jesus prayed so he could stay close to the heart of God, then so should we. And thank goodness for those reflections, because they are true.

Those of us who feel tugged to follow Jesus into a ministry of loving God's other children, even when it is hard, those of us who want our parenting and our marriages and our friendships and our professional relationships to bear the marks of the One whom we seek to follow, we have to find ways to prevent what some call "compassion fatigue" - those moments when we've gotten burned out because we've tried to do too much, and to do it on our own.

Beyond our day-to-day lives, too, we live in a time when the immensity of the world's need is relentlessly at our fingertips, reported on screens we carry in our pockets in wave after wave of urgent breaking news reports. Surely, I am not alone in wondering how to carry the awareness of suffering the world over, over most of which I do not have control, much of which, I am convicted, is the stuff that breaks the very heart of God, and therefore do not want to harden my own heart to it. Thank goodness that Jesus models for us the freedom to step away...to get quiet...to breathe...to pray. Thank goodness for a reminder that needing these things is okay.

The hard truth is that most of us aren't any better at following this model than the early disciples were. Because - remember - they got up that morning, too, probably while it was still dark, and looked around, and realized they couldn't find Jesus. And they begin to panic. The text says they *hunted* for him, and the sense of the verb in the Greek is just that hostile. They aren't casually looking for him, as some translations have suggested. They didn't simply "go after" him, as others render it, which might lead us to believe they were simply trying to follow him as good disciples might do. Simon and his friends *hunted* for Jesus. There's an intensity to their anxiety here.

As commentator Gary Charles puts it "[Simon] Peter and his friends are astonished at the behavior of Jesus and [they] come to restore him to his senses. This is the first instance in Mark of Simon Peter correcting

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Jesus...but it will not be the last. Simon," it seems, seems to think he "knows what Jesus should be doing, and it is *not* sitting in solitude and prayer. [Because] anxious crowds await his immediate attention."¹

I get the anxiety, don't you? Because I know what it is like to wake to a world that is still dark. And faced with the world's great need, faced with my own great need, I confess that sometimes, I, too, get anxious for God to work the way I think God oughta work - more obviously, more efficiently, more completely. It can be overwhelming to be aware of so much hurt, and to look around and wonder where Jesus has gotten off to, to wonder if Jesus is even paying attention. It is easy enough to look around and see brokenness and to take its presence as evidence of Jesus' absence. And we wouldn't be the first to raise that lament. Isaiah voices it on behalf of an exiled people in a text we often read in Advent, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," the prophet cries, and we with him.

I wonder what Jesus said as he looked at them, lifting his eyes from his silent prayer, wondering, "Do you not remember?" Before the crowd gathered, before the overwhelm of their pain was collected up and presented to him, before the word had begun to get out and the minds of the disciples had raced with the implications of his power, there had been this intimate moment - didn't they remember it? - in the home of a sick, unnamed woman...who had not cried out for Jesus' attention, but had received it anyway. Likely, they'd only told Jesus that Simon's mother-in-law was sick to excuse her from her expected duties of hospitality, not expecting the understated, but life-changing miracle that had come next, which was this:

Jesus took her by the hand, and the text says, he "lifted her up". It's the same verb used at the end of the gospel to describe his resurrection, when the women go to tend the body and hear "He has been raised. He is not here." - it's that word. And here, in this most mundane of actions, the holding of a hand, are the echoes of the gift he comes to bring: an invitation to participate in his resurrection life.

Which she does by serving. Serving the people right in front of her. Without being asked, in her being she connects resurrection life with humble, everyday acts now imbued with holy purpose. She rises to serve. This verb is *diakoneo*, which is where we get the word *deacon*. Resurrection servants. And she - she's the very first one.

And it is she whom Jesus reminds the disciples of when they come in anxious pursuit of him in that quiet, deserted, moment of morning prayer.

Notice that Jesus doesn't do what most leaders might be tempted to do when confronted that way, which is to be reactive, to jump into action, to base his ministry in the anxiety of the people, to go running back to where they think he ought to be to do the things they think he ought to do. It's a strange response from our

¹ FOTW, Year B, Vol 1, p337.

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Lord, but Jesus basically does the opposite, declaring that it is time for him to move on to preach in another town.

But before we conclude that he had callously left the people to fend for themselves, we are reminded that in his wake, Jesus leaves those whom he has touched with resurrection life, and who share it with others through simple acts of service. Not to curry favor or gain acclaim, but because they've gotten their lives back, because they have been restored to participation in their communities, and therefore know that the blessing of sharing everyday life with others is not something to take for granted, that it can be a venue for the holy to be made manifest. He leaves deacons, in other words. Resurrection servants, those who, having been lifted up, lift up the lives of those who are right in front of them.

I wonder if you've ever heard the story behind the title of Anne Lamott's book, *Bird by Bird*. It's a book about the discipline of writing, but I think the logic applies here, too, to the model for ministry I think Jesus is inviting us into in this passage.

She tells the story this way:

"Thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report written on birds that he'd had three months to write, which was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin...and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books about birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, "Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird."²

I wonder if that's actually the model for faithful living that Jesus offers us in our story for today. Maybe the relief Jesus gives to his disciples is not simply the permission to sneak away to piously practice peaceful prayer, though there's nothing wrong with that. Everybody needs a break sometimes.

But maybe the relief Jesus gives to his disciples is the permission to take things bird by bird, person by person, step by step. Like Simon Peter and the disciples, we can grow so anxious in light of the scale of suffering in the world, that we begin to wonder where Jesus has gotten off to, or if he's even paying attention. And it can be hard to know how to begin. Perhaps it can be here: perhaps in those moments of perplexity, in those moments when we feel frustrated that God doesn't seem to be working the way we think God *should* work, in those moments where we lament with the prophet, "Won't you just tear open the heavens and come down" and we're tempted to withdraw from it all, Jesus is sitting down beside us, and putting his arm around our shoulders and inviting us to take it person by person, one at a time, bird by bird....to trust that resurrection life can crop up wherever those whom he has touched are engaged in simple acts of service. And that it is enough.

² Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, pp.

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If that seems too cliche for you, or it sounds an awful lot like vacating responsibility for greater mission, then consider this story from Rabbi Sharon Brous, who tells of a community ritual from the period of the Second Temple, which is when Jesus lived. The ritual was for all those times

"when your heart is broken," she says, "when the specter of death visits your family, when you feel lost and alone and inclined to retreat. You don't take your broken heart and go home, though that might be your understandable inclination. You show up. You entrust your pain to the community." Here is what would happen:

Several times a year, the people of God - hundreds of thousands of them - would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. "They would climb the steps of the Temple Mount and enter its enormous plaza, and turn to the right en masse, circling counterclockwise.

Meanwhile, the brokenhearted, the mourners (and here, Brous would also include the lonely and the sick), would make this same ritual walk, but they would turn to the left and circle in the opposite direction: every step against the current.

And each person who encountered someone in pain would look into that person's eyes and inquire: "What happened to you? Why does your heart ache?"

"My father died," a person might say....Or perhaps, "My partner left. I was completely blindsided." Or "My child is sick. We're awaiting the test results."

And those who walked from the right would offer a blessing: "May the Holy One comfort you," they would say. "You are not alone." And then they would continue to walk until the next person approached." One at a time. Bird by bird.

"This timeless wisdom speaks to what it means to be human in a world of pain," the rabbi writes. "This year, you walk the path of the anguished. Perhaps next year, it will be me. I hold your broken heart knowing that one day you will hold mine."

She continues, "Showing up for one another doesn't require heroic gestures. It means training ourselves to approach, even when our instinct tells us to withdraw. It means picking up the phone and calling our friend or colleague who is suffering. It means going to the funeral and to the house of mourning. It also means going to the wedding and to the birthday dinner. Reach out in your strength, step forward in your vulnerability. Err," she writes, "on the side of presence...[because] small gestures remind us that we are not helpless, even in the

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face of grave human suffering. We maintain the ability, even in the dark of night, to find our way to one another. [And] we need this, especially now.”³

Jesus leaves Capernaum to preach about the coming reign of God in other places, but I think it is his model for ministry to call people in every place to rise where they are, and to show up instead of retreat. Not in showy ways, but in humble service to the ones they meet right where they are and wherever it is that they go. To commit to encounter God’s people with an open heart, one by one, person by person, bird by bird. That’s the model offered by the One who is raised. That’s how the One who is not here stays powerfully present here - in and through us.

Imagine a world full of people who hear and respond to that call...and how chock full of resurrection life that world would be.

To God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/19/opinion/religion-ancient-text-judaism.html>