

Invitation

Series: Correspondence from Paul; Philippians 3: 4b-14

Last spring, I became the assistant coach for my daughter's soccer team. This is pretty funny because I knew very little about soccer. I had coach some other sports, but never soccer. This past summer, when I signed her up for fall soccer, I received a surprise when I got a call to be the coach – the head coach! I still didn't know much about soccer. I felt terrified. I felt stuck. I knew the kids deserved better, but there seemed to be nobody else, so I agreed -- sort of on faith. So far, it's turning out okay.

This experience illustrates what seems to be the close relationship between fear and feeling stuck, and faith. Faith is a response to fear, but what does that mean to you? Of what are you afraid? Of what are you most afraid? What does faith mean in response to that fear?

The passage from Paul, in his letter to the Philippian Christians, seems to be vintage Paul. After posturing and reminding his readers at Philippi just how qualified he was to tell them how they should live (just the opposite of me with soccer), he goes on to characterize life and faith in a way that is meaningful and inspiring. Life is about pressing on despite fear and feeling stuck. Life is about persevering even when you don't know for sure what will happen -- kind of by faith.

In my high school yearbook, there is a caption under each picture. Each of us chose a pithy quotation to summarize our attitude as we prepare to graduate. I chose verse fourteen from this passage: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." I admit now what I felt to some extent then, that this caption seemed rather pompous and pretentious. As I've grown, however, and crossed over several stages of living, I am embracing it again. More often than not today, fear matters less than prospect of not continuing on the journey. The fear of not doing something often becomes greater than fear of doing it.

Let me suggest some questions for reflection.

- How is fear keeping you from being all you can be?
- When have you overcome fear to accomplish something?
- What will happen if you hold your fear and hold God at the same time?

I find myself always trying to understand what life is all about. What is the purpose for our lives? What is God's will for my life? What is my calling? It dawns on me that, maybe learning to trust enough to let go of fear, to trust while still holding fear, is the meaning of this life.

The problem with such trust is that we often feel inadequate. We realize pretty soon that we're not all that good or that strong. As Gordon Cosby, founding pastor of Washington, DC's Church of the Savior, has written: we "become aware of our wounds, flaws and shortcomings, and bring them to God for loving and healing, forgiveness and integration". Despite our inadequacies, we are nevertheless called to service. This is true despite the fact that we are not perfect specimens. We are still called.

Martin Buber was a Jewish theologian. He suggests that when you ask “What have I to do?”¹ with an open willingness to hear, the answer is “You shall not withhold yourself”. The answer sooner or later involves a generous willingness to live the answer rather than theorizing about it. It always involves a step of faith. It always falls to the individual, but it never happens in isolation.

Author Francis Dewar used to be a parish priest in the Church of England. He began to lead courses in spiritual growth and on the idea of journey inward/journey outward. He discovered that he was good at it and so began dreaming of beginning an Iona-like community in northeast England. Iona is an ecumenical Christian community on the Island of Mull off the west coast of Scotland. Finally, Dewar decided to move on this dream.

He began by articulating his calling and writing it down as follows:

- I want to work towards forming an ecumenical company of Christians who are committed to both the inward and outward journey and to disciplines to enable this
- I want, further, to work towards forming groups of ‘called people around tasks in society or church, so that Christians can be effective ministers of the gospel.
- This company of Christians needs to be independent so that it can be seen and related to by the unchurched – so that people can be in touch with our life without being committed to the church.
- My further hope is that this company of people would be connected in some way with one of the holy places in this geographical area, to draw also on the spiritual capital of the past.
- I believe I shall never give myself a chance to do this unless I leave the parish ministry and exercise this new kind of priesthood wholeheartedly. This means looking for some way of being paid and supporting the family.

His vision articulated, Dewar was clear that he needed to leave the parish ministry. This clarity presented two practical problems: a house (the parsonage no longer an option) and income. Very soon, he and his wife found a suitable house. It seemed just right except that it was well beyond their ability to pay. They talked to banks and other people and finally came to a complete dead end.

One day, while relaxing in the parsonage, an ex-parishoner came to the house and said that he needed to talk. Dewar sighed inwardly, invited him in, and braced himself to listen for the next hour. Instead, he heard, “My wife and I have heard about your proposed step and we have prayed about it and we would like to put 2000 pounds at your disposal”. Dewar nearly fell off his chair. In the following few months, seven other similar proposals followed. These enabled the purchase of the house and provided great encouragement and an endorsement of his dream.

Still looming was the question of income. Dewar went to his bishop since he was still Church of England clergy. The bishop was a great believer in clergy sabbaticals – six months every seven years. So he asked the bishop about a different twist on the

sabbatical idea: instead of six months every seven years, he asked the bishop to pay him for eighteen months based on his twenty-one years of service. The bishop agreed!

On way home, though driving a car, he was walking on air. All of a sudden, "Help! He's agreed". Dewar began to realize what a privilege it was -- what a responsibility! He could now get started. There would be no excuses.

They had eighteen months to get solvent. Dewar's wife Elizabeth went back to school to earn a certificate for social work. They would probably avoid needing public assistance.

For a first task, he attended an eight-day prayer vigil -- time to reflect and pray. While there, he heard that the nearby pub was for sale. A small group colleagues decided to consider buying it and invited him to join in. It would mean a slight deviation in plans, but this idea had possibilities as a guest house and an extension of the nearby retreat center. He felt excited, then conflicted. After six months, it became clear that this was not the project for him.

It was a really good idea, but for him it was a seduction. He was tempted to join with others so that he would feel less alone. It had been less than three weeks since setting out to follow his calling. He was feeling unclear about how to proceed and where to go. His dream needed time and care to let the idea grow in its own way. He was finding it hard even to communicate to others what he was hoping for. The others heard his vision only in light of their own and, as a result, he risked losing his vision within theirs.

The beginning is a vulnerable time in the process of living out any calling. We are quite vulnerable to the temptation of being diverted from our calling. It is no accident Jesus' temptations came at beginning of his ministry.

The way to live life and get into action is different for each of us. There are no ready-made niches. We must carve our own. Dewar offer some general guidelines for the process.

First, you have to be willing to take responsibility yourself for your action instead of joining a group whose decisions you hope will carry you along. There are three things in life you do for yourself: being born, responding to God's personal call, and dying. This is not mean being in isolation. "Genuine community emerges with people all exercising their particular gift. Pseudo community is a group of people huddling together for fear of taking responsibility for their own lives."

Second, don't expect signs from heaven to decide your course of action as a way of abdicating the responsibility for working at the issues of calling in your own life. You need enough clarity about call to take the next step. Don't give away the power that is yours to pursue God's call for your life.

Third, articulate your call. Do this for yourself. Write it down both for the long term and for the next step.

Fourth, when you feel ready, be willing to go public. Tell people what you're going to do and trust in the inner work you've done. Just cope with any feelings of seeming foolish or arrogant. Learn to see that if you only take a small step (10%) toward your call, God comes 90% of the way.

Fifth, take a practical step to correspond with your inner intention. Though keeping options open is often a good thing, there is power in focusing and moving along a specific pathway.

Finally, don't put God to the test. Beware of spiritual gimmicks (ex. if the next car I see is blue, then I'll go to India and become a missionary). Beware of irresponsible decisions (ex. quit job assuming God will take care of you). To follow call takes a combination of faith in God and using of all the wits and intelligence God has given us. It's not a matter of just shutting our eyes and jumping.

Consider this spiritual exercise. Picture yourself at the time of your own death. Imagine speaking a word back to your present self as you are now about the work you are doing or are thinking about doing. What do you say? What do you hear?

Now, imagine yourself speaking to this congregation from the wisdom of your own future about this present time. You are speaking to this congregation on our journey, about the choices we are making, the directions we are taking, and the identity we are clarifying. Imagine what you say. Imagine what we hear? I hear this: "Let all that we are and all that we do as individuals and as a congregation be done as a result of our love for God, our love for each other, and God's great love for us.

"Don't battle against society, don't tackle dead tradition, unless you have this love in you, for your struggle will be meaningless and you will merely create more mischief. Whereas, if you deeply feel what is right and can therefore stand alone, then your action borne of love will have extraordinary significance, it will have vitality, beauty." (Krishnamurti)

We are all like the barren fig tree Jesus encountered in the gospels and cursed for having no fruit. We often feel inadequate to perceive and accomplish God's calling for our lives. Still, we are called.

There twinges in my heart

A pity for that fig tree - barren -
Caught up within the eyes of Christ,
Cursed by his lips.

There echo in my soul

Defenses for the tree's unburdened limbs
Held light against the sky -

Perhaps

because it's I
who *am* the fig tree
content to wait the seasons out.

But *now* is the time for figs

Season or not -
I've looked for the sun too long.
Yearned for the rain to come and comfort me.
The earth to gather and to nourish.

It is the time for figs -

The hungry and the weak pass by
And the blossoms are an empty, bitter food.
It is the time for bearing.
Oh Jesus, look again on me
And cause in me such heaviness of fruit
That it shall fall unreached for round your foot.
The season is ripe:
It is the time for figs.

(Ann Maureen Gallagher IHM)

Blessings on you, barren fig trees. Blessings on us all. The creator calls from our barrenness an abundance of fruit. The Spirit of all truth calls from our brokenness the balm of healing. "Lord, who reigns ultimate love in all creation, pull from each of us faith to respond to your invitation to live. Amen."

Philippians 3: 4b-14 (NRSV)

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,