

Tear Down the Wall

Most people don't set off to get lost. You round the bend of a trail, take a wrong turn on the freeway, forget your phone at the office, and suddenly there you are. Lost. Off-course. Dis-oriented.

Most people get lost for one of a few reasons: they aren't paying attention, they get turned around by something outside themselves, or they are unwilling to admit that they do not know where they are. But what is curious about being utterly and truly lost to me is the fact that it can often be intensely clarifying. In her book, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, the author Rebecca Solnit reflects that often we must get lost in order to see the world in a new way, to draw new connections, make new meaning. We must, in other words, seek out the unexpected place where the unfamiliar can make itself known.

That was certainly true for Greg Boyle, who never expected to find himself in the place of unknowing. He entered the Society of Jesuits in the 1970s and was ordained to ministry in 1984. Not long after, he was assigned to the Delores Mission Parish in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of East Los Angeles, sandwiched between the projects in the poorest part of the city. It was trial by fire, literally. His entry into the community was marked by what he calls the "decade of death," in which he personally buried nearly 200 young victims of gang violence and brutality.

In his memoir, *Tattoos on the Heart*, Father Boyle reflects on how his initial reaction to the unending violence that saturated his neighborhood was to try to save gang members. He came up with endless job programs, negotiated peace treaties between rival gangs, sought to entice gang members to leave their gangs for a better life. But at some point, he writes, "I learned that saving lives is for the coast guard."

Instead, he was surprised to discover something truly unexpected: that when we go to the places where the vulnerable, the suffering, and the hurting are, we all find rescue. We find that there is no them and us; there is only us.

It is in this kinship with weak that God's Kingdom is revealed. It is at the margins that we are all transformed—not just those who need healing, but those who go to heal.

Consider our texts this morning. They exist at the margins—between where we have been and where we think we are going, between who is considered inside the community and who is not. And it is in that in-between space that God reveals what is important.

Take our Gospel lesson. If you will recall, it was not long ago that Jesus took his disciples to his hometown, where they find that their teaching is unwelcome. Mark's Gospel tells us that "they took offense at him," which I suppose is preferable to John's telling, in which Jesus' neighbors and childhood friends receive his words and then invite him to jump off a cliff.

And so Jesus finds himself at the margins of his own community, and sends his disciples out to heal the sick and preach the Gospel. We are told that their work is fruitful, but we also learn at the beginning of our text that the disciples are tired. Their work has been good but they are so busy they have barely

had time to eat. And so they venture with Jesus further into the margins, out into the deserted places in search of rest.

Unfortunately for them, the crowds of vulnerable and hurting people do not know that the disciples are on vacation. For no sooner do the disciples push their boat to shore than they are surrounded by ever more people, the need as urgent and unrelenting as before.

But something happens in that deserted place. Something that changes everything. Scripture tells us that Jesus looked upon the crowds and had compassion for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Now, it is easy to pass over this text because of what comes after—the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus walk upon the water will soon follow and easily overshadow what seems like a brief, transitional moment in this journey with Christ. But consider the miracle of this moment; in the midst of their exhaustion and depletion, Jesus responds in a way that helps his disciples to recognize the common suffering and humanity of these hurting, broken people. In that moment, they all are invited into kinship with the crowds—with their struggle, with their exhaustion, with their need. They are invited to see themselves for what they truly are: a community of broken and needy people who all are in need of the rest that only the Good Shepherd can provide.

In that moment, in the midst of that need, Jesus provides the gift that only God can give us in our lowest moments—he tends to the crowd so that his disciples can rest. He offers his brothers and friends the gift of solidarity with the very people they have been sent to serve. HE reminds them that all of us—helper and helped, insider and out, are in need of the rest that only the Good Shepherd can provide.

This is no small moment. Here in the desert, which in Jewish tradition is the place of struggle and testing, the disciples are invited to test the limits of their understanding of discipleship and to form true and abiding community and kinship with the house of God. It is a glimpse of the kingdom of God that will continue to unfold as together the disciples journey with Christ towards the cross and into the new hope of resurrection. No longer can they stand apart from the people, for the wall between healed and healer has been thrown down, and what has emerged is a new fellowship of mutual suffering and understanding that will find its fullest expression in the early church.

But the truth is that this is just the beginning. For in the letter to Ephesians we see how this fledgling kinship continues to challenge the followers of Jesus as it expands and widens its net to include those who once were far off. The Kingdom of God refuses to countenance the walls that we erect between ourselves and those whom we have labeled as outside ourselves. And so this time it is the apostle Paul who finds himself in the unexpected place, discovering kinship with the Gentile Christians. “For in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” The cost of following Christ is tearing down the convenient barriers that kept us apart, and engaging in the messy work of truly mutual life together.

And truly, the work is messy. Paul’s mission to the Gentiles puts him at odds with the rest of the early church. His ministry is continually questioned, his call mistrusted by those who are comfortable with the way things were. But he stands firm in the knowledge that Jesus did not choose the easy path—his ministry, too, is marked by conflict with those who are content with things as they are, those

who would prefer that those at the margins—tax collectors, Samaritans, sinners, prostitutes—stay exactly where they are.

Recently I heard a wise theologian say that the work of theology is not reserved for the seminary educated. To be a theologian, she said, is simply to expect God to show up and do something.

And so, I believe, the question for us is this: What do we expect God to do with the walls that we have built for ourselves? What unexpected places is God's Spirit leading us to, that we might experience healing, challenge, and transformation? Where might we need to get lost for a while, so that we can see differently?

Earlier this week, I had the opportunity to get lost, so to speak, with one of my sheroes who I believe is pointing in the direction of healing and wholeness for those of us in white, mainline Protestant churches. I was in St. Louis at the Young Clergy Women's conference, and was blessed to attend a talk given by the Rev. Traci Blackmon, who is currently serving as the Executive minister of justice and local church ministries for the UCC. But you may have heard of her because she was the face of the church in Ferguson MO during the aftermath of the Michael Brown murder. She and other sheroes answered the call of the afflicted in those days, heading out to the streets and finding solidarity with the suffering and the forsaken. Along with saints like Mama Cat, whom Traci has called the chief officiant of communion on the street, these brave Christians offered solidarity, hospitality, and healing to people when it seemed that they had been forgotten and dispossessed. And as she spoke with us, Traci reflected that the task of the church is to open our doors to our communities, to listen to the voices of the suffering, and to put the afflicted at the center of our work and our worship because they are the ones in the most pain, and that is what Christ did. She reminded us that our task is to listen to the margins, to pay attention, because we may just find that the margins have something important to teach us.

When we do that, it may at first seem like things are getting worse, but the truth is that when we practice kinship with the suffering, we are merely uncovering what was already there to begin with. We just needed to get lost enough to see it for ourselves. We are bearing witness to the lived experience of God's people, and that, my friends, is exactly where healing begins. For we cannot be healed until we understand what we are suffering from.

There are many walls that we have erected around ourselves—walls that keep us apart from our brothers and sisters who differ economically, culturally, racially, spiritually, politically. But these walls do not serve us. They are killing the movement of God's Spirit in the world. But they are no match for the Good Shepherd, who breaks down the dividing wall and in its place builds a foundation for the Kingdom of God, in which all the sheep of God's pasture find rest, and healing, and peace.

May we be brave enough to put ourselves in the unexpected place, where God is even now building something new, not a wall, but a bridge that may help us see that there is nothing that separates us from our brothers and sisters but our own unwillingness to meet them in the place where God's Spirit dwells. Amen? Amen.