

**“Changing Views Along the Way”**  
**Acts 1:6-11; Acts 7:54-56**  
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The scriptures from today are two stories of men staring up into the clouds, trying to get a look at heaven. In the first, after Jesus has given the disciples their marching orders and been beamed up into the sky, the eleven stand staring at the clouds, perhaps awaiting some further instruction. Without their leader, they seem clueless about how to proceed, clueless about how to bring that beloved community, with which they have been charged, to Earth. They are looking for a vision of heaven, but all they can see is the clouds. And finally, two angels are finally sent to move them along. “Nothing to see here.” And they wander away. Their vision is blocked, clouded; they cannot see the way forward.

I was struck this week by the similarity in their story and my sense of our own time. As I listen to the news it seems to me that we live at a moment which is characterized by seemingly insoluble problems: the environmental crisis, the impending collapse of our social welfare programs, unending warfare, an economic system dependent upon excess and exploitation, widening rifts and ever-increasing ineffectiveness in our democracy. I am simply stymied by the problems that we face- not only these giant societal problems, but the personal problem of how I live as an individual in the midst of such deeply broken systems, how I live, when my every action seems to have so many adverse affects on my environment and my neighbor. I confess that I, like the disciples, am often staring into the clouds, hoping to see my way through to some sort of solution. Staring and wondering, “Where do I go from here?”

Then I read our other scripture. In our second story of a man staring into the clouds, Stephen seems to have found a new way of seeing. Like the disciples, he too stares into the sky, but unlike them he is rewarded with a vision of heaven. What was opaque for the disciples at the beginning of their mission, has now become clear to Stephen; what was hidden has been revealed; he can now see the end toward which he has been working. But why? What’s the difference between these two scenes? Has Stephen really gained a new way of seeing, some holy x-ray vision? I don’t think so. I think what has changed for Stephen is not his vision but his place on the journey.

### **Discipleship**

The writer of Acts uses a phrase I really like to describe the early Jesus movement, which is taking shape over the course of his book. He calls it, “The Way,” and we assume that for at least part of that early community this is how they identified themselves- people on “the way.” Before Jesus’ followers were mockingly named Christians, and even further before there was some static and monolithic thing called Christianity, the disciples were merely following “The Way.” The difference between the disciples as they begin their journey and Stephen (as he prepares to end his) is that Stephen has begun to travel along the way, and the view changes when we move along the way. Stephen has just spent the last few chapters caring for widows and orphans,

living in community, sharing his income and possessions with all who had need. He is given a vision of heaven, only after he has taken the first steps in that direction.

There are things we can only see after we've started our journey. And there are things we can only learn to do by doing them. The word for such activities is "practices," and they include things like pole vaulting and praying; dancing and discipleship. We learn to do these things by setting out on the way. Only as we move along on our journey do new possibilities arise. Only then do we receive a vision for how to proceed. From the outside, such practices may seem impossible or at least cloudy.

## **Dancing**

For example, in the days before we could stream movies on Netflix, Rachelle and I sometimes watched ballroom dance competitions on PBS. I was always struck by my failure to predict who would win. I would pick out my favorites, and they would inevitably lose. The judges seemed to be watching an entirely different competition from me, and in fact, they were. Having traveled along the way of dancing, they could see so many things my eyes did not take in: how the dance conformed to the rules of the waltz or tango, where the couple chose to flout those rules for effect, not to mention all the tiny nuances of movement and expression which lasted only an instant. Having taken up the practice of dance, their eyes were open in a whole new way.

Likewise, only those who have taken up a practice can see their way toward performing such feats. As someone who has not walked on the way of dancing, I have about three moves at my disposal. The pliés and pirouettes of ballet seem as impossible to me as flying. But like walking on a long trail through the woods which finally opens up into an expanse of field and open sky, when we engage a practice, new vistas of possibility open up. Things which were once unimaginable come into the realm of possibility. Performing open heart surgery, or piloting an airplane; or winning Olympic gold may be impossible for most of us to imagine, but for those who have practiced they may come into view.

## **Marriage**

There are things we can only see after we've started our journey. And there are things we can only learn to do by doing them. Marriage is another of those seemingly impossible feats. There is no learning how to be married beforehand. Let me share with you a little trade secret. Don't let this get out: When ministers do premarital counseling with a couple, it is generally with the assumption that they are not listening. OK, not entirely not listening, but certainly not fully aware. When a couple comes to get married, the train is on the tracks. In fact, the train is rolling, and there is often a manic DJ, photographer, or wedding planner shoveling coal into the engine at an amazing rate. The decision has been made; the caterer has been hired; a deposit has been paid on the reception hall- this wedding is happening. And all we as officiants can do is shout a few instructions about good communication or get the couple to think for a moment about what it might be like to share a bathroom before the train blows by.

And that's actually OK. We, as ministers, don't try to prepare couples for marriage as much as to deposit a few tools into their subconscious, tucked away for a day, not far off, when they will begin to realize just what it is they have done, realize the way they have begun to travel. The runaway wedding train is OK, because it is simply

the nature of marriage, of any commitment to another person, that we don't know how to do it until we do it. In marriage, in partnership, in childbirth, in adoption, in friendship we make promises that we do not know how to keep to people who continue to change. We make promises, and we have no idea the situations or circumstances that will challenge us to keep them. We only learn to keep those vows by keeping them, but by keeping them we do get better at keeping them. Like the dancer, like the disciple, when we engage the practice of marriage with focus and intention, new vistas of relationship may open up, we'll find new ways of seeing our life together.

## **Community**

There are things we can only see when we start along the way. And there are things we can only learn to do by doing them. Like UCG, the church I served in Chicago has beautiful worship- interesting sermons, meaningful prayer and practice, and excellent music- which they treasure. But worship in that congregation changed drastically when a new man showed up one Sunday morning. I will call him Panama Jack, although Jack's real self-proclaimed, Caribbean-themed nickname rhymes, which makes sense since he almost always speaks in rhyme. Jack lives on the edge of homelessness on the north side of Chicago. On the first Sunday that Jack attended, he stood up during the choir's special music and began to play along on his harmonica badly. And almost every Sunday since then, many of the songs feature Jack's off-key harp.

Playing harmonica is not Jack's only contribution to worship. He shows up late each week and sits in the front row. At an appointed time during the sermon Jack takes out his sinus medication and begins to shake it loudly, uses it, then blows his nose. After a powerful song or sermon, while the rest of the congregation sits in meditative silence, Jack breaks in, "Oh mama, I love it!" As the staff of the church, we had several conversations about Jack. How could we welcome Jack and keep the beauty of our worship service? What would church look like with Jack around? We did set some boundaries around his playing, asking him only to play along with congregational songs and not to bring his toy xylophone or spoons. But mostly, we began to look for a vision of worship that included Panama Jack.

My friend who still works at the church, says Jack has begun dancing while they take the offering. But she also said that Jack finds a dollar to put in the basket every week, and he recently brought a large and very dirty stuffed unicorn to the church, hoping to donate it to the children of the congregation. She wanted me to be honest with you about the amount of annoyance which Jack causes for those who are trying to lead worship and those who are worshipping in the congregation. But I think she would agree that Jack and the congregation are learning from one another what it means to be church, what it means to be a community, what it means to worship a God who welcomes and loves all. Jack has opened up new vistas of faith that they could not have seen before. He has made the community stronger and more faithful.

Recently, another member of the congregation began to sing a Neil Young song during what was supposed to be a silent prayer. My friend said her first thought was for the visitors sitting next to him; her second was hoping there was no profanity in the song. But then she decided just to close her eyes, and smile, and pray, and act as if it all was normal, since it more or less was. Later, a few other people from the

congregation shared that they had been worried at first, but when they saw her in front peacefully listening, they figured it was alright. And everyone there was gifted with a new vision of heaven, a closer look at the beloved community they were on their way to creating.

In marriage and community, in discipleship and dancing, seemingly impossible feats are performed every day. You too probably do things which I cannot imagine or envision because of the practices to which you have committed, the ways you are traveling. And this gives me hope for all of those seemingly insoluble problems, all of those opaque and intractable issues that plague us. I believe there are solutions; I believe there is a way through to a new and heavenly vision. But we have to practice.

What are the insoluble problems in your own life? What impasses block your vision? Are you looking for a way to perform the impossible task of bringing your energy usage in line with international standards? Are you looking to change the way you eat to be healthier or more sustainable or more meaningful? Are you looking for a way to relate to your family, or renew your marriage, or love the Southern Baptist Convention? You don't have to have the answer to begin, you just have to start on the way. You may not be able to see just where you are going, but if you take the first steps, new possibilities will arise.

Our society is in need of massive changes, but I don't believe we even fully know what they are yet. We have to trod new paths before we can find a new vision. And we have to listen to those who have walked those paths, to learn what impossible things they know. We have to walk a little further on the way of repentance and forgiveness with those we love before we can see our way to creating a justice system not built on retribution. We, like Stephen, must practice looking after widows and orphans before we will discover a new vision for how we care for our children and elders. To see a new way of relating to food, we may have to start with Meatless Mondays, which may lead us to Tofu Tuesdays, which may inspire us to keep bees, or raise chickens, which may plant another crazy idea, that leads to another and another, until eventually we find a way back to juicy, red, flavorful tomatoes in our stores.

There are bigger problems than tomatoes, and we need people with the vision to solve them. We can no longer ask those on the way of war to lead us toward peace. We can no longer look to those on the way of wealth for ideas to end poverty. We can no longer expect a politics of competition to result in a vision of community. The way of war teaches us to war; the way of accumulating wealth teaches us to accumulate wealth; the way of competition teaches us to win. But these are not the lessons we need to learn.

The insoluble problems are solvable. Hunger is a solvable problem. Homelessness is a solvable problem. Even hatred is a solvable problem. It just takes practice.