

**Epiphany
And the
The Confounding Parable of *the Bridge*
The United Church of Gainesville
Epiphany, January 4, 2009
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Matthew 2:1-12

The *Fable of the Bridge* which I am about to share is one that I have used only in counseling sessions where I could process it with individuals one on one. But I felt that it was appropriate for a sermon this Epiphany Sunday, for Epiphany itself is a bridge of sorts between Christmas and the New Year, the day legend has it that the Magi arrived at the stable.

The Fable of the Bridge was written by the family therapist and Rabbi, the late Edwin Friedman, one of my favorite practitioners of family systems therapy. He is best known for his book Generation to Generation, where he explains that many of the issues and behaviors that come up in close knit groups like churches, schools, and businesses are repetitions of patterns we learned in our families of origin.

I'm going to tell you his Fable of the Bridge from his book Friedman's Fables (Guilford Press, 1990).

"There was a man who had given much thought to what he wanted from life. He had experienced many moods and trials. He had experimented with different ways of living, and he had his share of both success and failure. At last, he began to see clearly where he wanted to go.

Diligently, he searched for the right opportunity. Sometimes he came close, only to be pushed away. And then at last it came. But the opportunity would not wait. It would be made available only for a short time. If it were seen that he was not committed, the opportunity would not come again.

Eager to arrive, he started on his journey. With each step he wanted to move faster. Strength that had left him since his early youth returned, and desires, all kinds of desires, reawakened from their long-dormant positions.

Hurrying along, he came upon a bridge that crossed through the middle of a town. It had been built high above a river in order to protect it from the floods of spring.

He started across. Then he noticed someone coming from the opposite direction. As they moved closer, it seemed as though the other were coming to greet him. He could see clearly, however, that he did not know this other, who was dressed similarly except for something tied around his waist.

When they were within hailing distance, he could see that what the other had about his waist was a rope. It was wrapped around him many times and probably, if extended, would reach a length of 30 feet.

The other began to uncurl the rope, and, just as they were coming close, the stranger said, "Pardon me, would you be so kind as to hold the end a moment?"

Surprised by this politely phrased but curious request, he agreed without a thought, reached out, and took it.

"Thank you," said the other, who then added, "two hands now, and remember, hold tight." Whereupon, the other jumped off the bridge.

Quickly, the free-falling body hurtled the distance of the rope's length, and from the bridge the man abruptly felt the pull. Instinctively, he held tight and was almost dragged over the side. He managed to brace himself against the edge, however, and after having caught his breath, looked down at the other dangling, close to oblivion.

"What are you trying to do?" he yelled.

"Just hold tight," said the other.

"This is ridiculous," the man thought and began trying to haul the other in. He could not get the leverage, however. It was as though the weight of the other person and the length of the rope had been carefully calculated in advance so that together they created a counterweight just beyond his strength to bring the other back to safety.

"Remember," said the other, "if you let go, I will be lost."

"But I cannot pull you up," the man cried.

"I am your responsibility," said the other.

"Well, I did not ask for it," the man said.

"If you let go, I am lost," repeated the other.

He began to look around for help. But there was no one. Why did this happen to befall him now, just as he was on the verge of true success? He examined the side, searching for a place to tie the rope. Some protrusion, perhaps, or maybe a hole in the boards. But the railing was unusually uniform in shape; there were no spaces between the boards. There was no way to get rid of this newfound burden, even if temporarily.

"What do you want?" he asked the other hanging below.

"Just your help," the other answered.

"How can I help? I cannot pull you in, and there is no place to tie the rope so that I can go and find someone to help me help you."

"I know that. Just hang on; that will be enough. Tie the rope around your waist; it will be easier."

Fearing that his arms could not hold out much longer, he tied the rope around his waist.

"Why did you do this?" he asked again. "Don't you see what you have done? What possible purpose could you have in mind?"

"Just remember," said the other, "my life is in your hands."

What should he do? “If I let go, all my life I will know that I let this other die. If I stay, I risk losing my momentum toward my own long-sought-after salvation. Either way this will haunt me forever. What a choice I have to make; how shall I ever decide?”

As time went by, still no one came. The critical moment of decision was drawing near. To show his commitment to his own goals, he would have to continue on his journey now. It was already almost too late to arrive in time. But what a terrible choice to have to make.

A new thought occurred to him. While he could not pull this other up solely by his own efforts, if the other would shorten the rope from his end by curling it around his waist again and again, together they could do it. Actually, the other could do it by himself, so long as he, standing on the bridge, kept it still and steady.

“Now listen,” he shouted down. “I think I know how to save you.” And he explained his plan.

But the other wasn’t interested.

“You mean you won’t help? But I told you I cannot pull you up myself, and I don’t think I can hang on much longer either.”

“You must try,” the other shouted back in tears. “If you fail, I die.”

The point of decision arrived. What should he do? “My life or this other’s?” And then a new idea. A revelation. So new, in fact it seemed heretical, so alien was it to his traditional way of thinking.

“I want you to listen carefully,” he said, “because I mean what I am about to say. I will not accept the position of choice for your life, only for my own; the position of choice for your own life I hereby give back to you.”

“What do you mean?” the other asked, afraid.

“I mean, simply, it’s up to you. You decide which way this ends. I will become the counterweight. You do the pulling and bring yourself up. I will even tug a little from here.” He began unwinding the rope from round his waist and braced himself anew against the side.

“You cannot mean what you say,” the other shrieked. “You would not be so selfish. I am your responsibility. What could be so important that you would let someone die? Do not do this to me.”

He waited a moment. There was no change in the tension of the rope.

“I accept your choice,” he said, at last, and freed his hands. -

And that’s the way the story ends.

I wouldn’t tell this story to a group of people who were in the habit of casting those who came to them for help off bridges. And you are clearly not that kind of people. You are people in whom the Judeo-Christian ethic of loving your neighbors, even giving up our comfort and happiness for your sisters and brothers, is ingrained in your souls.

This story seems to run against everything we believe in about loving not only our neighbors but our enemies as well.

Yet there must be a grain of truth in this tale, for when we hear it, we are drawn to it.

So how do we reconcile the truth within this story with the golden rule, to do unto others as we would have them to do unto us?

First, and once again, the story is a metaphor. Am I clear that I am not recommending that anyone here drop people who cling to us on bridges to their death? Good.

Second, even as a metaphor, this story is meant to be the exception rather than the rule of our lives. There are countless times each of us has delayed or diverted our own journeys for the sake of others, and these have been good and appropriate.

Yet, there is that moment called, “One the other hand...” when a situation comes along when another person confronts us with a demand for help when he or she is completely unwilling to do anything for him or herself. That is the key element here.

In the biblical story of the Good Samaritan, the man attacked by thieves on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho does not refuse to leave the side of the dangerous road, nor does he tell the Samaritan that he must stay with him there, preventing the Samaritan from continuing his journey and putting the Samaritan’s life at risk as well.

In the bible story of the Magi, the wise ones today, Herod asks them to return to him with news of where the child born King of the Jews was could be found, so he too might go and worship him. But the Magi are warned in a dream that Herod is up to no good, and the Magi do not go home via the way of Herod that he might throw his rope around them and sabotage their mission.

Third, let me give you an example. I know of a young couple, not in this church, where every time they were ready to take the next step in their lives the young woman’s mother did the equivalent of throwing her rope of neediness around their relationship. She did it first by announcing her decision to divorce her husband, the young woman’s father, on the night of the young woman’s marriage so that their wedding anniversary was forever tainted with that crisis. Then the mother, without money or a job, moved in with the new couple. Eventually they bought a house and set her up in it so she could support herself doing child care. The young couple then moved to another state. The mother didn’t pay the mortgage and they had to sell the home, which was still in their name, at a loss. After this she moved in with them again.

Eventually of course the young couple’s marriage ended. Later, the young woman once and for all threw her mother out of her home, saying she had to move on with her own life. She did the equivalent of unwinding that rope from her waist, but it was too late to save her marriage.

Fourth, we have been taught, in our faith, that self-sacrifice is a higher value than achieving our own salvation. But self-sacrifice may not always be what God requires of us. In fact, much of the language of

Christian sacrifice developed in the Middle Ages when royalty wanted to keep their subjects under their control. Today, many an unequal relationship is maintained by one party controlling the other by insisting on being an eternal victim, and calling on their rescuer's faith and moral duty to stay with them.

Fifth, the biblical admonition is to love your neighbor as yourself, which requires us to first love ourselves.

Before I close I have one parenthetical application to this story which I just thought of last night. The last two times this church has had a major new chapter ahead of it, in 1983, and 1990, the economy has tanked. The economy has come into our congregation, threw its rope around our collective waists and said, "You can't move ahead now, we're in a recession. None of you can risk this financially. You've got to stay with me here." In 1984, we uncurled that rope, built the Church School wing and renovated the fellowship hall. In 1991, we uncurled the rope and built the office wing and this sanctuary. And, we voted to become an Open and Affirming Congregation.

Today, we are in a search for a new associate minister of adult program and pastoral care. This does not mean adding a new professional salary line, for this person will be paid from Sandy's current salary and Sandy and I begin working half time. But there are extra expenses involved with the search and transition. You will hear soon that we will be over \$65,000 short of our budget with our best projections.

Candidates looking at our church will look at how we meet our budget this year. They will ask if they are coming to a place of financial stability in tough times. All of us who have jobs and secure incomes cannot let the threat of the economy's fall stop us from making the extra commitment for this church to move forward. And this is not meant to be a burden on anyone who is suffering significant financial loss this year. We are here for you as well. It is a challenge to commit ourselves to a new future.

This is just one parenthetical application. But it is the kind of challenge this church has overcome throughout its history.

So consider this story carefully. It is call not to be selfish, but to be careful of yourself.

Finally, consider this story also as a call to be aware that the person who confronts us on the bridge and refuses to allow us to move on may also be a shadow part of our own selves, the part of us that undermines our own journeys.

In this day of Epiphany, a day of considering holy journeys, take this story of the bridge with you. Tuck it away. Remember it. Ponder it, and know that a very wise Rabbi and counselor offered it to us as a precious gift, to be used, carefully for sure, in our own journey toward salvation.