

Oh But My Darling, What if You Fly?

Readings: From God and Other Famous Liberals (Forrest Church); The Gospel of Mark 9:30-

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*There is freedom waiting for you,
on the breezes of the sky,
and you ask, "What if I fall?"
Oh but my darling, what if you fly?*

This poem by Erin Hanson surfaces every so often – usually on inspirational Instagram pages, or on somebody's desk at work in a publishing or advertising firm. You know, something creatively-oriented. But it's come to hold a more vivid meaning for me these days. Last week, our dear brother Konstantin preached prophetic words about seizing our own creativity, owning and opening it into the world as an act of resistance to forces that continue to threaten our very existence. We are the creations of a creative God, a forward-moving and limitless force for good, and yet I realized, how many times have I turned upon my own ability to create, to dig deep into my own reserves because I have felt too world-weary? How many times have I chosen to avoid the road less traveled? How many times have I looked at the world's great need and gone, I can't face it, I can't help, it's too much and all is lost? Well, I don't know about you, but for me there have been too many times. And for good reason. We are living in a weird culture. We are living in a bizarre time. We are in a moment in modern western history where we are blasting into the past; our collective social morays strain to move forward, but our governing forces push against this advancing creative act to return us to something that we should have left long ago. The scent of authoritarianism is in the air; the mistaking of individualism for individuality is rampant. Our souls are disquieted for a reason; for this goes against our intrinsic rhythm, a rhythm that guides us ever forward, not backward. And most pervasive of all, from whatever worldview you might be coming, is the palpable sense of fear. For some, the fear stems from a sense of not being protected by our basic legal and ethical foundations. For others, it has more to do with not being ready to give up the fairytale of the America that never was. Either way, the fear is a natural and absolutely human reaction to the inexorable reality of change, of evolution, of transformation. It is how we respond to it that matters.

Ever noticed how much fear is in our gospels as well? The gospel of Mark features a culture of fear, especially amongst the disciples who seem both afraid of Jesus and his teachings, and afraid of actually engaging what he asks of them. The reading for today is like a "best of" collection of thematic fear around Jesus' actions in ministry and how, as disciples, to engage them. "They did not understand what he was saying," the text tells us, "and were afraid to ask him." The disciples are as lost as any of us would be as they witness his ministry: he speaks in parables, he keeps miraculously healing people that no one else could or would help, and weirdest of all he keeps predicting his own destruction. Then through all of it, he doesn't want any advertising. Everything he does he wants kept on the down-low. What on earth did all this mean? And if they didn't understand, why on earth didn't they ask more questions? Knowing the end of the story, it's easy to criticize the disciples for their massive shortcomings, or wish Jesus had picked a group that was more self-reflective. Yet if he showed up at my doorstep and said, "the first shall be last and the last shall be first, so come with me and I'll teach you how to be a servant to everyone else," I doubt that I'd be on board for that. In fact, I think I'd be terrified –

terrified that what he means is to discard my own well-being to sacrifice my entire soul for the world around me.

Well, no one – except maybe Jesus himself – could live up to that. And I don't believe that he was suggesting that we attempt to do that. But that is often how we read this, and the natural, human response to that interpretation, whether conscious or unconscious, is to protect ourselves from destruction. How could we possibly serve everyone else, sacrifice ourselves for the good of others, and have anything left in our own reserves? We can't – and so for many of us, even making the attempt to follow this teaching becomes an impossibility. Perceived failure ushers in guilt and anxiety, or we may turn away altogether in discomfort at even making the attempt.

*So what if we came at this from a different angle? In this time, this season of total cultural anxiety and disruption, how might we understand the teachings of this radical rabbi, how might we live our lives in fullness rather than fear – while still sustaining our own well-being? What if being “last of all and servant of all” wasn't about neglecting our own needs but instead discovering the depth of our own talents and sharing them with liberal abandon? Rev. Forrest Church, in his book *God and Other Famous Liberals: Recapturing Bible, Flag and Family from the Far Right*, grapples with his own sense of self-protection, of playing things safe while trying to live into the true meaning of the word “liberal,” whose synonyms include: generous, indulgent, compassionate, flexible, non-doctrinal, free-spirited. He spends a great deal of time with Jesus' ministry in this book, as a Universalist Unitarian who very much rooted his theology in the gospel. In our first reading, he reveals the experience that shifted his way of understanding how following Jesus by going all-in needn't drain an individual of his own happiness or well-being. After all, one of the marks of American liberalism is a penchant for avoiding zealotry. So some of Jesus' more extreme statements, like “give everything up and follow me,” he generally took as a gentle suggestion not to be taken too seriously. His story about Bart Harvey, who decided to quit his Wall Street job and take the oodles of money he'd accumulated to work with a Maryland non-profit on fair housing for low-income families, all because Jesus told him to, is amazing, but also terrifying, in a way. Most of us hear this story and admire Bart, but we can't imagine actually doing what he did. How risky was that? Surely he must have given things up in the process, certain comforts, certain conveniences, certain relationships, perhaps; but whatever he gave up, regrets have never been at the forefront. In fact, he has spent the rest of his career working on public policy and helped shape the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit on the national level. Bart didn't save the world. He couldn't solve all housing problems in America or fix a system that continues to need dire repair. Yet as Church noted when Bart Harvey came back to see him years later, his life had changed in a way that led to his own thriving: instead of a desire to secure his own salvation, whatever that meant for him personally, the work he was doing fostered a deeper, more sustained sense of content and well-being within himself.*

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*As many of you know, I had a previous career in musical theater as an actor in the Broadway community. So now, I perform occasionally as a vacation swing in *Chicago the Musical* at the Ambassador Theater on Broadway, which means I fill in for various actors who are taking leaves of absence. *Chicago* is the longest-running American musical on Broadway, having opened in November of 1996 and still going non-stop 8 shows a week. There are a handful of actors in the show now who have been with it almost from the beginning, and there is one woman who swings the show that I met maybe 10 years ago when I first came into the*

*Broadway cast who left an indelible imprint upon my life. Every musical has swings, which are offstage understudies for all the ensemble characters and sometimes also the principal characters. The swings have to know each of their respective onstage counterpart's roles, and be at work every day ready to go on for anyone in case someone gets sick or injured. I entered the show as a swing and know how incredibly challenging it is – sometimes getting thrown in last minute for a role you just learned, without rehearsal, or going on for three or four different characters in three or four consecutive days! So when I met Sharon Moore, a Broadway dancer who'd worked with the legendary choreographer Bob Fosse himself, I tried to learn everything I could from watching her. She joined the show soon after it opened at the request of Ann Reinking, the show's choreographer who used many of Fosse's original dancers, and when Sharon hits the stage these almost 22 years later, your eye immediately goes to her. She moves with a ferocity of abandon and a commitment to story-telling that comes from the depths of her being, coming at the audience with an energy that commands you to lean in, to listen, to watch and to lose yourself in her narrative. In a Broadway culture with young folks coming up into new shows and expecting to float through without working too hard, Sharon Moore is the real deal, hitting the show each night as if it were the first. What most people don't know until they get to know her better is that Sharon Moore also cannot see. She's legally blind. Sharon began to lose her vision many years ago, rapidly getting worse until she could only see through two tiny pinpoints in the center of each of her eyes. She is, by all counts, something of a miracle. For anyone to sing and dance in a musical requires the whole of one's senses; hearing, sight, physical stamina and agility. At least that's what has always generally been believed. And in a show like *Chicago*, which features side-lighting like dance concerts do and bright spotlights on an otherwise dark and tiny stage, even a person with full capacity to see and hear must be on their guard with a heightened awareness at all times. By all logical standards, Sharon couldn't actually be doing what she does, and to date is the only Broadway musical actor who is performing with this specific disability. Yet not only is she doing it, she doesn't miss a mark. Sharon is one of the most talented performers I've ever met, and when I'm onstage with her, she infuses me with a palpable electricity that courses through my veins, that lifts me up and re-centers my own contribution to telling the story in a way as exciting, as visceral, and as generous as her work is. She is also wildly generous of spirit. Even now, all these years later, when she's on while I'm in the show, at the places call she'll grab my hand and give it a squeeze, or kiss my cheek – the other day she simply came up and put her hand just above my heart and said, "my baby." She doesn't ask for anything. She doesn't even tell people she's blind. She doesn't want the attention or to be treated any differently – she just loves doing what she does, and thrives by giving to the audiences that come to see us. When a new cast member comes in, those of us who know her will casually make them aware, just so they know to speak up if they're coming round a corner or behind her backstage. And every reaction is the same: "she can't see? I had no idea! How does she do it?!" Followed by, "she's...amazing. That's amazing. It's unbelievable." And it is. She is. She could have made a very different choice when she began losing her vision. As her disability became more acute, many in her position would have seen no other option than leaving the only career she had ever known, hoping to figure out the rest of her life as best she could. Sharon chose not to. She made a different choice, a choice that to this day isn't easy; as new people come in and the choreography gets adjusted or changed, Sharon is faced with a new challenge almost every month. But to this day she has no regrets either. She loves what she does and made the choice that she knew would make her thrive. It was an active resistance to the fear that strikes the heart of any person who must face a world transformed –*

whether it is transformed because of outer circumstances that we are called to respond to, or by something within us that forever changes our lives. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," Jesus told his disciples...but to be last of all doesn't mean crushing the unique talents within you. To be servant of all doesn't require suppressing the gifts that the divine spirit has infused in each of us. Rather, it's through the uncovering and the cultivating of the abilities we have that we are able to fully live into that seemingly impossible task of being last, of being in service to all. So in this time, when we feel ourselves contracting with fear, shutting down from anxiety, let's regroup. Let's re-center our spirits within the truth of our own holy gifts that only we can share with the world...

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