

Learning to Live

Lynette Sparks
Third Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 10:24-39

Two weeks ago when my sister and nephew were visiting from Iowa, we took a day trip to Niagara Falls. And as we stood on the Canadian side right by the Horseshoe Falls, we immediately recalled the event two years ago when Nik Wallenda walked across the falls on a two-inch-wide wire. We watched it live on TV as perhaps you did.

I remember very clearly what that felt like. For 25 minutes, we sat in our family room glued to the TV and holding our collective breath as we watched Wallenda walk 1800 feet across the swirling waters below. Even though he had to wear a tether, my heart pounded as he inched his way along the downward slope and then back up again.

I remember leaning forward watching him navigate blinding mists and steadying himself on the swaying wire as the wind gusted. I remember that those 25 minutes were some of the fastest 25 minutes I've ever experienced. The tension, the expectation, the uncertainty – would he make it? I felt fully alert, fully engaged, fully alive.

Last week we “Presbyterian geeks” experienced a similar tension as we watched proceedings of the 221st General Assembly. Who knew that agendas and overtures and parliamentary procedure could be so gripping?! This time, we had a personal stake in the Assembly, beginning with the election of the moderator. Your emotions may have run the gamut, as mine certainly have. We were all in this with you, John. We know deep in our bones the gifts God has given you for such work, and we're disappointed that the wider church won't experience those gifts in the faithful way that we do here at Third Church every single week.

We also need to acknowledge that we're also disappointed for ourselves. Time and time again, I was heartened to hear congregation members say that Third Church would be recognized as a leader in the national church. We embraced that challenge to lead. We wanted to lead in this way. We even thought we were called to lead in this way. And the result isn't quite what we hoped, or even expected.

I've no doubt we'll still be called to lead in other ways. And yet, our ultimate call has really never been to lead; it's always been subordinate to following Jesus. That hasn't changed. Our call is and always has been and always will be to follow Jesus. It's exactly the same today as it was before the election.

Do you want to know what my favorite line in John's candidate speech is? It's the line, “Let's double down on trust and be the church.” I'll give you a little scoop. About a week and a half before the election, a bunch of us gathered together to help him hone his speech. And we discussed that phrase “double down” quite a bit because someone pointed out its association with gambling. Would that be problematic? Would “double down” be heard poorly in some circles?

As good Presbyterians do, we debated the pros and cons, and we ultimately recommended that John keep it in. I for one, am glad he did, for it's a powerfully evocative phrase. To double down is to take a big risk. And isn't that the nature of following Jesus? Isn't that what Matthew said in today's Gospel text? Jesus said, “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is

not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

There’s a paradoxical tension in that. In fact, Matthew seems to suggest that following Jesus means living with those things that stand in tension with one another: Following Jesus is really hard...but do not fear. You’re going to experience scary things... but don’t be afraid. Put your life on the line, and you will actually find life.

And if that weren’t enough, Matthew meddles with our understanding of Jesus as the Prince of Peace: “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” In other words, as one writer said, Matthew’s gospel is a reality check: sometimes following Jesus creates divisions. We have seen this in our General Assembly; decently and in order sometimes masks a lot of chaos!

As you may have seen in the media and as John already mentioned, the Assembly has passed overtures that lead to marriage equality. I watched the the livestream discussion and vote on Thursday afternoon with all of the attentiveness I had watching Nik Wallenda over Niagara Falls. As a More Light congregation supporting the full inclusion of all people, we rejoice at this historic moment. People in this congregation have led this cause of justice for a very long time, and we have shed tears of joy.

At the same time, as hard as it is for us to understand, there are equally genuine followers of Jesus who interpret Scripture differently, and they’re now saddened, even frightened, by this. We still have tension, albeit now in a different form, and it still calls us to follow Jesus and his work of reconciliation with one another.

You may also know that the Assembly grappled with other issues, some where the level of controversy continues at a fevered pitch, especially around Israel and Palestine. What’s the right thing to do? What will lead to long-term peace and cessation of violence? What will protect creation? In some matters Presbyterians sharply disagree with one another and with different parts of the interfaith community. And again, in the middle of each disagreement remains the call to follow the reconciling ways of Jesus.

As all of these issues have been bandied about, I want to share with you some of the present-day expressions of the cost of discipleship that I’ve read on Facebook and Twitter by people who’ve been in the middle of all these tense conversations:

“Tired, mentally exhausted, praying for my brothers and sisters who are hurting...”

“Always important to remember that many/most of our decisions, even well-considered, may leave someone weeping.”

“Much joy, hope, pain, and forbearance. And our work of unity and reconciliation is just beginning.”

If anybody has ever understood the implications of being Jesus’ disciple, it is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who said to lay down our life as an act of discipleship is “to be aware only of Christ and no more of self.” To be so bound to Christ that we obey his commandment to love him and love one another with the love that is worth more than life itself.

I once heard that if we are supposed to follow Jesus, it must mean that he’s on the move. We know that in our own community the challenges of poverty and education and violence are so great that surely Jesus must be headed that direction. Surely Jesus wants to break down the structures that keep generation after generation trapped in those cycles. Blessed are the poor, Jesus said. Blessed are those who mourn, who hunger, who are persecuted, who carry heavy burdens, for theirs is the kingdom of God. We’re still called to follow him there.

So our greatest hope might be that as disciples we will change the world. We want to change the world. It may be our greatest hope, but maybe that's not our best hope. Maybe our best hope in the ambiguity and confusion surrounding us is that we will learn from the One we follow, and we ourselves will be changed. And maybe that's the riskiest thing of all.

Our post-9/11 context says something far different. We value safety and security and certainty above pretty much anything else. We have whole industries built around risk management. We have products that cater to our every fear. I sometimes wonder if we haven't turned ourselves into a culture of control freaks! And yet, as one New Testament scholar wrote, "the gospel calls us beyond the zone of comfort into the realm of risk."

So here's my take, for what it's worth: We need the ambiguity; we even need the uncertainty, for without it, we will settle for our own short-sighted vision and walk only where our own feet will take us. Yet Jesus says if we will embrace the tensions that come with being his disciple, we will find life abundant. In our context, we may not face the high level hostilities of the early church. For us, maybe it means giving up something in order to address the societal injustices against our neighbors – injustices that are hardly benign. Maybe it means losing our life in thousands of little ways – letting go of our need for security, of our need for the good life, or even of our need for being right.

When I was in Detroit last weekend, I got to spend some time catching up with my way-cool cousin (20 years younger) who now happens to work for the Presbyterian Hunger Program. We hadn't seen each other in nine years, so we had a lot to catch up on. Two Mennonite cousins who ended up seminary trained in Presbyterian theology and polity – go figure. We had this amazing conversation about things that matter – our shared family and faith heritage, the way our understandings of God's justice and mercy have deepened and expanded, the struggles we've experienced, and the life-giving journeys we've been on as we seek to serve and follow Christ. And best of all, how we couldn't imagine living any other way. Amen.