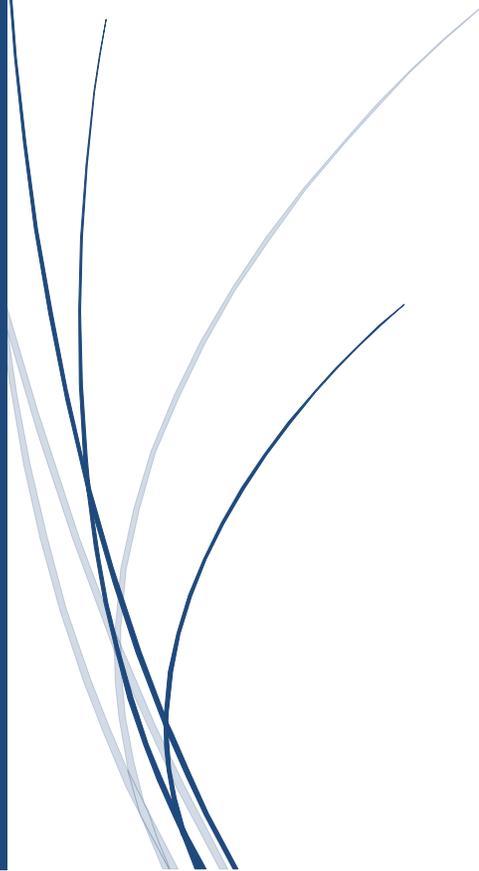




3/20/2016

The Gift of Misfits

Part 6 in the series: Gifts of the Dark Wood



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In Matthew 4:17 Jesus says “Repent! For the Kingdom of heaven has come near!” That phrase always reminds me of some half crazed street preacher with a bullhorn and a sandwich board sign, right? Repent! Doom and gloom – End of the world!

But what if we translate it a little bit differently? How about, “Change your whole way of thinking! Heaven is already here!” That’s an accurate translation, too, so why don’t we ever hear it that way?

The first way sounds like a threat: God’s coming any day now to condemn you to eternal torture if you don’t confess your sins and believe right now!! I guess that’s one way to get people in the pews, but the second translation is considerably more inviting; You don’t have to wait to find heaven anymore; change your thinking and you’ll find that heaven has been waiting for you all along! Now that’s some Good News.

But if heaven is here, available to everyone now, and not just some afterlife experience, why is the world such a mess?

I can imagine the skeptics in the crowd: “Jesus, you’re *meshugenah!* The Romans oppress us on the left and tax us on the right – how can heaven be here?

Or, “How can heaven be now when my child just died, or my spouse just died?”

And Jesus’ reply suggests that this invitational translation is truer to Jesus’ original intent than the scary, end of the world one. Jesus next words are the beatitudes or “blessed be” statements -- the perfect rebuttal to the cynicism of a downtrodden and oppressed crowd. They can’t conceive of the idea that heaven could be here now.

According to Jesus, the people who find deep blessing in this world:

- Are poor in spirit
- Mourn the loss of a loved one
- Hunger and thirst for righteousness (nowhere to be found)
- Make peace in the midst of conflict
- Are persecuted
- Are slandered or discredited

And Jesus doesn’t stop there. He goes on, turning his audience’s ideas of heaven upside down.

It's outrageous! We're supposed to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. We're supposed to accept that God makes the sun rise on both evil and good, and sends the rain on both the just and the unjust.

If we're going to believe that heaven -- the Kingdom of God -- is available right here right now, then we do need to change our way of thinking. Heaven must be different than I thought.

We know that the world is a place of continuous struggle. If heaven is here and now, then heaven can't be in the absence of struggle. We'd never find it. Jesus' teachings would be meaningless.

Heaven must be in the struggle -- in the woods. Our deepest challenges offer our most profound opportunities.

Until now, we've been looking at our quest for a life path primarily as individuals. We wake up in the dark wood and we think we have to find our own way through it. But good news! None of us make this journey alone.

Considering the obstacles and challenges found in the dark wood, it would be as reckless to go in there alone as it would to go alone into an actual dark wood. Without companions, we'd get lost. Besides, it's in them that we get our clearest glimpses of heaven.

Once when some Pharisees were grilling Jesus, they asked him when this so-called Kingdom of God was coming. Jesus told them -- I think he was a little fed up -- he said, "You can't point to it and say 'here it is' or 'there it is.' The Kingdom of God is among you." And there's a little footnote on the word 'among' because it's one of those Greek prepositions. *Entos*: Not only means 'among' but it also translates as 'within,' and 'in the midst of you.'

So is the kingdom of God in the midst of you? Or within you like 'within' your heart?

Yes! We've talked before about the importance of community -- *koinonia* -- the community of your church family, the fellowship of Rotary or UMW; the group you have coffee or breakfast with once a week. The Buddhists call it *sangha* -- community dedicated to "the good way, the upright way, the knowledgeable way, and the proper way."

While we do walk individual paths, we're more likely to get lost by ourselves, or give up, or both. There's no shortage of lightning and thunder to guide us, but interpreting signs from the Spirit hasn't been our strong suit. We

make mistakes, we're afraid, and we have trouble letting go of that false self-image that the world keeps trying to stick us with, which is way too small for child of God.

Making the journey with a few wise companions keeps us from getting lost, and makes the journey less lonely, even fun – especially when we discover that we're helping them find their place in the world, too.

If we go into the dark wood alone and stay there alone, we'll be back at the adversary's tavern in no time – drinking the brew of false joy, worshipping, as Elnes puts it, “at the Cult of the Mediocre.” So the Spirit offers possibly the most important gift of all: the Gift of the community of misfits.

Now, before you have some kind of reaction to the word ‘misfit,’ Elnes defines a misfit as someone who is as intentional about embracing the gifts of the dark wood and finding their place in this world as you are. They're relatively rare in today's world of consumerism, “religi-tainment” and quick fixes, but there's plenty of us out there, swimming against the current, even in the tiniest of towns.

There are at least three kinds of misfits who serve as powerful companions.

The first is an interpretive guide – a mentor. Having spent a little more time traveling through in the Dark Wood than you, they're more familiar with the trails that lead over cliffs, or out into the bright avenues that lead you back to the taverns and doing the wrong good. You might have more than one mentor, they aren't always by your side, but you check in with them regularly, especially when the trail becomes faint or the lightning hasn't flashed in a while.

A mentor can be someone whose life's path matches our own but it doesn't have to be. It's more important to find someone who's familiar with the Dark Wood. Think of a spiritual director, a professional counselor, or a wise old friend. The disciples had Jesus. In the 12-step program, you find a sponsor – someone to guide you through the steps, to show you how to navigate life without using.

I still have a couple of people that I can call on to listen without judging, to share perspectives, who don't feel a need to turn me into a miniature version of themselves.

Books can also serve a role as mentors to a point, but books will only take you so far. Eventually you need a real flesh and blood human who knows your

story and loves you anyway – or at least respects you enough to give you the advice you need rather than the advice you want.

The second misfit gift on our journey is a small band of traveling companions. Think of a small group bible study or the people you meet for lunch once a week or so. They don't have to be as familiar with the dark Wood as your mentor, and they don't need to be on the same path as you. They just need to be committed to finding a living within their own place of aliveness – following a call that keeps them out of the Adversary's taverns of mediocrity.

The disciples had each other. In the 12-step program, this could be that small group that gets together for coffee – the meeting after the meeting. These people are, or will eventually become close friends. This is critical because you meet or talk with these people more often than you talk to your mentor. This is where you share your joys and fears, your triumphs and tragedies. You're there for them and they're there for you.

The third misfit gift is different from the other two, and much harder to come by. As with any rare commodity there are a lot of cheap imitations out there. Most people only know the imitations – the cheap knockoffs – and so they don't see this gift as anything special; but it is. The third misfit gift of the Dark Wood is a community of faith – but not just any community of faith, a misfit community of faith.

Just as individuals have unique paths and callings, so do communities. Elnes points out that these misfit communities are rising up all over from the ashes of the world's dying religious traditions. They're communities that have found an identity that looks very different from the tradition they grew out of. They're the kind of community that I dream of – that I envision our church community becoming eventually.

If a personal mentor is like an interpretive guide, and the small group of traveling companions is like a group gathered around the campfire, then the misfit community of faith is like an alehouse in the Dark Wood. Not the adversary's taverns; think of a traditional English Pub or a bar like the TV show "Cheers" – where everybody knows your name. People who gather there are drawn to the camaraderie and conversation -- the basic spirit of the place. It's more a product of the spirit than any human work. Sometimes the whole place breaks out in song – sometimes in a fight. It's a diverse crowd, but there's a spirit in them that transcends differences. Like alehouses, no two misfit faith communities are the same.

Some of these misfit communities meet in houses or coffeeshops; my friend Jerry leads a misfit community that meets in a different pub every week. If you're ever in Denver on a Monday night, look up After Hours Denver – see where they're meeting that week. This is truly a misfit faith community. No building. No pulpit. The altar is often a pool table with a plastic sheet over it. Their Call to worship is making sack lunches for the homeless. People are drawn to the camaraderie, the conversation, and the desire to know more about God.

I mentioned that I envision our own church community taking on some of the characteristics of these misfit communities, but we don't have to abandon our traditions. Traditions aren't stagnant. In the history of world religions, traditions grow and change like living breathing things. Old traditions morph into new, but familiar, traditions that reflect the growing edge – the widening circle of a particular faith.

But regardless of the faith tradition that they grew out of, all these misfit, fringe-y, communities seem to have the same three emphases -- the *three great loves*: Love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self.

When you see what's happening in these emerging communities one thing becomes clear. While it seems like the major faith traditions of the world might have let go of the awe, wonder, and untamed joy of the Spirit; the Spirit has not let go of them. God still flashes and thunders, joy still rains down on us.

People are making their way into the Dark Wood and they're finding a sense of wholeness and whole-heartedness that comes when body, soul and the calling of the Spirit all come together. Some call this convergence their "place in this world." Others call it the Kingdom of God.

So, repent! Change your thinking! You'll find that the Kingdom of God is already among you!