

The American Revolution was a ramshackle affair. Yesterday, at the reading of the Declaration of Independence, a number of us were marveling that it had happened at all. No Facebook, on which to organize protests; no Twitter spreading updates on the progress of battles; no reliable source of money with which to pay or equip the soldiers. Only printed broadsheets being carried on horseback along muddy roads, men reading documents from tabletops, and the courage and determination of a few strong leaders to seek a freedom they had never known, even if finding it would cost them their estates or their lives.

Historian David McCollough shows, in his book *1776*, that the entire first year of the war was a fiasco. Cold, disorder, “disease, hunger, desertion,” lack of effective communication, internal discord, untrained leadership -- all these ensured that there was no major American win until the end of December.¹ Indeed, the last day of the year found General Washington, acting without authorization, ignominiously begging the soldiers in the army not to leave, and offering them a bounty of one and a half months’ pay if they would just stick it out for another half year.² If anyone had suggested that this small group of men and women might yet achieve something, they’d have been laughed out of court. And yet, somehow, out of the crucible of those dark days, there emerged a new story into the world.

If there was ever a revolution as poorly-equipped, surely it is the one we read about in today’s Gospel. Jesus, having begun his work and selected twelve key disciples, sends them out from him for the first time with some rather peculiar instructions: “He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, ‘Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.’ So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent.” (Mark 6:8-12)

Christ’s instructions open the way for his disciples to experience a time of radical dependency. Without money, without food, without spare clothing, these men will be utterly at the mercy of whomever they meet. Jesus does not use the word “beg,” but the implication is clear enough: the first test that each potential disciple they meet will need to pass is the test of welcoming strangers. And Jesus plans for failure: he tells them in advance what to do when they are not made welcome. The parallel passage in Matthew adds a sentence, reassuring the twelve that, if they are not offered hospitality, “it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town.” (Matt 10:15) In Mark, Jesus gives them no such cold comfort. If they are not welcome, they are not welcome. It’s clear the the disciples are about to learn a lot about human nature.

But perhaps few of their experiences will show them so much as the method of their going: two by two. We are accustomed, I think, to understand these pairings as offering mutual support, security on dangerous roads, encouragement, and companionship. And I’m sure they did. Anyone who’s gone to summer-camp or college, or who has worked at a discouraging job, knows the value of having one friend with whom you can laugh off the difficulties of the day, one person who can shake the dust off you and remind you that you really are better than all the nay-sayers think.

¹ David McCollough, *1776*, p.294.

² *Ibid*, 285.

But along with all that, partners provide one more thing which is essential to the spiritual life: friction. To work alone is to choose your own destination, your own luncheon spots, your own means to get the work done. Working with another person requires a constant stream of negotiation. It forces you to take your vision, your dreams, and to compromise them for the sake of another. It requires humility: the humility to accept that another person might just see or think more clearly than you do.

I had a revealing conversation a few days ago with a friend who writes well-respected business books. She has been finishing her third, which is the first she has written with a co-author. A year ago, when she started, she was amazed at her own cleverness, to get a whole book with only half the work. Now, however, she says it was much *more* work: not only to write her own portion, but to consult with her co-author, to harmonize their styles, to figure out ways to critique her co-author's chapters without pressing the other writer into a purely-defensive reaction. Two days before deadline, they were at an impasse. All of it was done except half of one chapter, the co-author's work, which the other woman was refusing to edit, even though three editors said it was totally incoherent. Frustrations were running high. It was an object lesson in the cost of community.

St. Paul couldn't do it. The fiery preacher, the great evangelist, the visionary convert couldn't manage to keep a partner to save his life. The record is clear: quarrels, dissent, pleading for company: "Demas has deserted me," (2 Tim 4:10) "all deserted me," (2 Tim 4:16) "only Luke is with me." (2 Tim 4:11) To many of us, I think, visions like the one of which Paul boasts to the Corinthians are the aim and goal and apex of the spiritual life: "I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven -- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person...was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat." (2 Cor 12:2-4) Most scholars believe that Paul is speaking here of his conversion experience on the Damascus road, when God knocked him off his horse and addressed him by name and sent him out a changed man. He is speaking of being caught up into heaven, of being shown the hidden things of God. And yet, these things seem to have set Paul on the track to heaven, not to have left him at the apex. When the revelations were over, there were still the demands of normal life.

Nobody knows what Paul meant when he referred to the "thorn" in his "flesh," but we do know that St. Paul seems to have found it an agent of grace. He writes, "to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." (2 Cor 12:7-9) In spite of the visions, or because of them, Paul was compelled to wrestle with his own frailty, his own continuing imperfection. He did not get to claim that he was better than everyone else because he had seen the things of God. Rather, he was invited into a place of radical dependency, in which his own acknowledged brokenness became the holy ground on which he met his God.

The constant, daily negotiation with others, with our own imperfection, *is* holy ground, for it is the place in which we admit we are not God. When we cling to our own righteousness, condemn everyone who disagrees with us, then we are setting ourselves in a little niche and asking the living image of God all around us to bow down before it. Only by resolutely refusing to climb into that niche, or when others refuse to place us there, do we open a space for God. Nowhere did Jesus suggest that it is possible to be a disciple alone. He gathered his followers into communities, and sent them out in pairs. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the apostles organized churches, gathered groups of Christians together so that, together, they could learn to see the face of God.

Obviously, there are times when we see God best alone. We all need times of silence and solitude. Walking in the woods, listening to birdsong, praying in the darkness for a loved-one who is

dying -- these are profound spiritual experiences. But the touchstone of any spiritual experience is how well it serves us when we take up the cross and the glory of trying to be together. St. Teresa of Avila, who was one of the great visionary saints of the church, was all too aware that the devil could manufacture visions. The test of a true vision, she said, was the way the Christian lived when it was over. If it brought increase of humility and of charity (by which she meant, mutual love and care), then the vision had been of God. If not, it was not divine, no matter how holy it appeared to be.

Twice in this sermon I have used the phrase "radical dependency." I do not mean that we are to be merely *dependent*, passive do-nothings who expect others to do for them what they can do for themselves. This is not the message of Christ. When Christ healed the man at Bethesda, he told him to take up his mat and walk. Similarly, St. Paul told the Thessalonians that "anyone unwilling to work should not eat." (2 Thess 3:10) But our *interdependency* is radical; it stems from the root of us, where we are made in the image of the triune God. We were made to be in conversation, for in such conversation, as much as in any vision, lies our conversion.

And perhaps we are being called to conversion as a nation as well, if not conversion to Christ, then conversion to some of the ways Christ taught. The big issues of our time -- the degradation of the environment, an economic system in which citizens of certain nations enjoy an overabundance of stuff while hundreds of millions of people lack food and clean water, the anger arising from these conditions which has embroiled us in a non-stop condition of war and terrorism, unequal access to education and opportunity which deprives us of the gifts of millions of men and women, a lifestyle in the developed world which seems to be unsustainable in human and environmental terms -- these are all things which no one political party, and no one nation, can solve alone. We can no longer allow disease, hunger, and discord to ravage our nation or our neighboring nations. It doesn't take a vision to see this writing on the wall; we can abandon our false pride and beg others to work together, or we can hang separately. Going it alone is no longer an option.

Richard Rohr points out that Christ does not seem to imagine that there will ever be a Christian world. When he speaks of Christians, he speaks of leaven, not of the whole loaf, of light for the world, rather than a world of light.³ The images suggest that Christians are called to be a small fraction of the world's diversity -- but a fraction that makes a difference. We can lead conversations without insisting that everyone agree with us. We can remain in partnership even with people who drive us crazy. We can model compassion and forgiveness and grace for hardened people who know little of them, and we can learn them from other people who have received nothing *but* grace to survive in a hard place. We may never see a vision, but, if we live the way of Christ, we will BE one. Thanks be to God.

³ Richard Rohr, *Simplicity: The Freedom of Letting Go*, p.54.