

What Makes Us Come Alive

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Isaiah 11:1-10; Isaiah 61:1-2; and Luke 4:16-22

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I recently heard a story about an exceptional young man.

It was a couple of weeks ago on the Moth Radio Hour. In case you've never listened to it, the Moth (M-O-T-H, just like the critters that eat our woolens) provides a chance for people to tell true stories from their own lives. So on Moth this young man from Boston, Massachusetts, tells the story of his life.

Early on, he says, he came to the conclusion that his life was a failure. His high school counselor had told him he was such a loser that no one would employ him. He was just too odd, said the counselor, with no people skills at all.

The young man explains that the conversation with his counselor motivated him to drop out of school. Education, he concluded, was wasted on him. He was in high school in the nineteen-seventies, and like many kids in that era, he decided to join a Rock band. Realizing belatedly, that he had no musical talent (a prerequisite for a music career he hadn't taken account of) he started working on the electrical equipment the bands needed to perform. He got really good at this.

Dealing with people was a puzzle he couldn't solve, but fixing guitars, microphones and amplifiers was second nature to him. And, because he got so good, he worked with some of the top Rock bands in the world.

Along the way, he happened to meet a psychiatrist who took the trouble to observe and listen to the young man, and who recognized that this young man probably had Asperger's Syndrome. Aspergers is characterized by difficulties in exactly the kinds of social interaction that had caused the young man's school mates, teachers and counselor to label him as strange.

The psychiatrist told the young man that if he was interested, a new study was underway at Harvard Medical School and he might be able to get in. Indeed he did get into the study. And, once he was in it, he discovered the most amazing thing. He discovered that he was gifted, exceptionally gifted.

He discovered that the very thing that had seemed like an affliction in his life, making it *impossible* even to look other people in the eyes, was the condition that made it *possible* for him to understand electrical things that left other people bewildered. Among the musicians with whom he worked, he didn't come across as odd, he came across as professional.

He said that his so-called "handicap" had turned out to be a blessing. His so-called "disability" gave him abilities others didn't have. This not only made him unique, it gave him joy. And, ironically, it became his gift to others.

Which brings me to a remarkable insight the Reverend Dr. Howard Thurman came to. It is an insight that at first I just wasn't sure was true. But I've come to believe it is true, it is the key not only to discovering joy in our own lives, but to fulfilling God's calling of us.

Here's what Dr. Thurman said: *"Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come fully alive."*

I want to say that again: *Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come fully alive."*

There are so many people who bang away in vain on the square pegs, or the rectangular pegs, or the star-shaped pegs *that they are*, trying to make themselves fit whatever hole other people tell them they need to fit into. All the time they are wishing they were made differently, all the time they are trying to be something they aren't, they are ignoring the fact that God made them square or rectangular or star-shaped pegs for a reason.

We've all heard some version of this before: *we need to trust the God who made us as we are, and to use that combination of gifts and limitations that makes us unique.* This may sound like a bromide for those who want to be self-satisfied, but, really, it is the commonest sort of common sense, and it is the key to our blessedness, *and* it is also the key to meeting the real needs of the world.

Which brings us to our gospel lesson today, and the strange case of the carpenter's son in the synagogue.

The Book of Isaiah lay open on the reading table in the synagogue at Nazareth the day that Jesus came home, the day he read to the local congregation. Isaiah is a book rich in messianic prophecies and promises of God's reign. Two, in particular, relate to the story we read in our gospel text today:

There was, of course, the text Jesus actually reads from Isaiah 61:1-2 that begins, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,"* and goes on to proclaim the *"acceptable year of the Lord's favor,"* a promise of this-worldly redemption that is woven into the divine law, although there's no evidence it was ever observed.

And there was also the passage from Isaiah 11:1-10, which prophesies that a branch shall grow forth from the root of Jesse, and that *"the Spirit of the Lord,"* *"the spirit of wisdom and understanding,"* would rest upon the one who exercises the justice of the Lord God who takes the part of those who are lowly, poor, and meek.

In the passage we read from Luke's Gospel, we are told about the congregation's reaction when Jesus reads from Isaiah and makes his brief comments on that scripture. *"Today, in your hearing, this prophecy has been fulfilled."* In other words, *The reign of the Lord is present right now, right here. We're all witnesses. We're all participants. Liberation, healing, forgiveness of debts, freedom from guilt and sin: all of these promises for a future are on our doorstep right now. Open the door.*

At first, everyone was amazed. They wondered at Jesus' generous and hope-filled words. And they whispered among themselves, "*Isn't this Joseph's Son?*" But, as Jesus continued to speak, the mood began to change.

Some thought that maybe the carpenter's son was getting above his raising. "*Yeah, this is Joseph's Son.* I remember him calling my store pranking my clerk, asking if we have "Sir Walter Raleigh in a can." There's nothing that gets the hometown crowd more in an uproar than when one of their own appears to get above their raising.

I can just imagine the guidance counselor from Jesus' high school standing up in the synagogue that morning and saying: "*Okay now, listen to me: I administered the Messianic SAT Test myself. You are not the Messiah. You're a very naughty boy.*"

I can also imagine the trepidation from some of the folks who weren't all that excited about God's day of redemption starting immediately. They didn't mind the ancient stories of a Living God active in history back then. But they weren't all that eager to have God intervening in *their* history right now. Maybe the home congregation just got a case of messianic cold feet. It's one thing to be promised heaven in the bye-in-bye, and quite another to find out they're getting up a bus load today right after church.

Whatever the reasons may have been, the immediate aftermath of Jesus' appearance in the hometown pulpit became an ugly scene. Everyone in church that morning got mad. Really mad. Murderously mad. Luke says, "*all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath.*" And they rose up and threw Jesus out of the city, and they would have thrown him off the edge of a handy cliff nearby, but somehow Jesus slipped away from them.

I would say that on the scale of bad reactions to a sermon, this ranks a ten. But why were they so upset?

Almost everyone was looking for the Messiah it seems. That, by itself, couldn't be the problem. The followers of John the Baptist were looking for the Messiah. Remember when they came to Jesus and said, "*Are you the one, or should we look for another?*" That's not an isolated question. Lots of people were asking.

Failed Messiahs and messianic pretenders were not uncommon in Jesus' world. The economically and politically oppressed eagerly looked for the Messiah who would turn the tables on the powerful. The religious leaders expected the Messiah, some with longing, some with contempt, and others with dread. Tyrants feared the Messiah because they feared anything that might threaten their control.

The messiahs who gained approval in Jesus' neighborhood seemed to have one thing in common: they were explicitly social and political saviors. Their portfolio was the liberation of the people of Israel from the yoke of Roman domination and oppression. That's nothing to sneeze at. If we were occupied by a foreign power, that is exactly what we would look for.

In his hometown debut as a preacher, Jesus does not hesitate to align his mission with the great messianic prophecies of Isaiah, the Prince of Prophets. And these prophecies all contain elements that are explicitly social and economic, even what we might consider political. But as the ministry of Jesus unfolds, we discover that Jesus' messianic mission was more radical and far-reaching than just political liberation or social change.

The messianic mission of Jesus was to call others to what theologian Jurgen Moltmann once described as "a messianic life" of their own. Jesus sought to instill in others a spirit that changes the kingdom of the inner-heart, a spirit that messes with our motives as well as our actions.

Jesus himself observes in Nazareth another reason why the hometown crowd rejected him. It was because *they were the hometown crowd*. They had decided long before Jesus sat down in the synagogue what Jesus could and could not be in relation to them. According to them, the carpenter's son was intended to be a square-shaped peg, and they fully believed that there was a nice square-shaped hole he could fit into in their little town. Prophets are seldom honored in their hometowns.

But Jesus never fits anyone's preconceived mold no matter what their religious, political or social assumptions might be. He's an equal opportunity blesser, but he's also an equal opportunity offender.

Jesus seems also to have identified one other reason that his hometown crowd rejected him. He said to them: *"No doubt, you will tell me, Physician, heal thyself. The wonders of healing you worked in Capernaum, do here also."*

But Jesus understood that in order to be healed, one needs to submit oneself to the physician's diagnosis. We need to have confidence in the physician in order to be treated, and the congregation in Nazareth was not prepared to place themselves in the hands of this physician. Of course, that's not just a problem in Nazareth.

The human being isn't good at diagnosing the human problem. We tend to treat the symptoms, but rarely want to address the disease itself. Mostly we just want something to soothe the discomfort so we can go on as we are.

Our human ineptness in this regard reminds me of Archie Bunker (of "All in the Family" fame). Remember the episode in which he was suffering from considerable, let's just say, digestive discomfort. Edith, always eager to help, told Archie that what he needed was more roughage in his diet, to which Archie says, "No, no, Edith, I don't need more roughage. I need more smoothage!"

That's humanity when it comes to understanding what we really need.

God created each of us for purposes that fit the person God created us to be. That is a true for us as it was for Jesus. God seeks to reign in our lives so that we might live abundantly. God

has perfectly equipped us to live these lives abundantly, and, in living these lives to allow his reign in our hearts to be expressed in love, grace and kindness, mercy, justice and peace.

The needs of the world are inexhaustible, but we are not. If we dance to the tune of the world, trying to meet all its perceived needs, we will only deplete ourselves and annoy our friends. God created us to pursue that which make us “come alive,” as Dr. Thurman said. But by living that life for which God created us, we will bring to the world that which the world most needs from us, whether the world realizes it or not.

I have to warn you, though: This may not always be a bed of roses. There may be tears falling like droplets of blood in many a Garden of Gethsemani as we struggle to accept God’s purposes. There may be days when our gifts are unwanted by those we most want to help. But, at the end of all our days, we can rest assured that God created us and desires us to be who he created us to be. The consequences we must entrust to the hands of God.

I know this isn’t the only thing that needs saying as we turn our faces toward Bethlehem. But I am also sure, that if what we do with our lives does not make us come alive, we will not live for long, however long we continue to exist.

Let us choose life, that we may live.

Amen.