

## **Beat a Path**

Lay Reflection for the weekend of July 4-5, 2020

by Deborah Nimmons

Sunday readings: Zechariah 9:9-10, Psalm 145:1-2, 8-9, 10-11, 13-14, Romans 8:9, 11-13, Matthew 11:25-30; Saturday gospel: Matthew 9:14-17

Who else reads this Sunday's gospel and hears the song, The Weight: "I pulled into Nazareth, was feelin' about half past dead. I just need some place where I can lay my head... Take a load off, Fanny. Take a load for free. Take a load off, Fanny. And (and) (and) you put the load right on me..."? Since childhood that song pops into my head every time I hear Jesus say, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Did you know that song was influenced by the movies of Spanish Director Luis Buñuel and his theme of the impossibility of sainthood? Maybe the problem isn't sainthood, but our definition of "saint."

I've been doing a lot of thinking around words lately: how we use them and how they impact us and shape culture. Maybe when you hear "saint" you think of comic book styled superheroes of faith: martyrs, theologians, miracle workers, the greatest among us. Sounds exciting. But have you ever felt you could meet that standard? I haven't.

Holding up greatness as the standard of faith *might* encourage high standards of behavior, but it could just as easily discourage people from doing the humble thing in front of them or cause them to discount the value of their lives, faith, or the work they can do. Focusing on "I can't lead a movement or found a religious order" can get in the way of realizing the importance of a kind word turning away wrath, actively listening with an open mind, believing someone else's report of their lived experience, taking authoritarian words out of your daily language.

"Greatness" as a standard can and has been used to wield power over people who don't meet the standard. *I am not a man.* If cisgendered male is the standard measure for godliness or greatness in the church, I can never be those things. It is not the same to say, "well, you can be godly in your own way" or "you have a 'different' role and that role is important" because the presumption is still that I am and always will be "other" to those who wield power and that "other" is second class.

So, I suggest we set aside the standard of saints and forefathers as heroes and embrace Jesus' admonishment when he told us that the last would be first and the first would be last. Your value is that you are a living being and not whether you have done so-called great things. Elevating some requires we put others down. That standard of superiority bleeds from every form of hierarchy into our streets and homes.

In Sunday's gospel, Jesus ushered in a new way of faith - the new wine, as it were - a yoke of grace instead of legalism, a burden of tending to needs instead of institutional hierarchy, supremacy, and suppression of those who will never be able to measure up in spite of being created in the exact same image and likeness of God.

We don't need heroes.

We need new wineskins for new wine.

In Saturday's readings, Jesus says, "People do not put new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise the skins burst, the wine spills out, and the skins are ruined. Rather, they pour new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved." Matthew 9:14-17

A long time ago people used containers made from animal skins to carry wine. If you've ever had anything made of leather, you know that it begins to take the shape of whatever it holds over time: a pair of leather shoes will form to your feet.

As new wine ferments, it expands. If you put new wine into an old skin, the old skin wouldn't be able to stretch as the wine ferments and expands. It would split and spill the wine. A new skin would grow and shape to the wine as it expanded.

Jesus' message of a new life of love did not fit and could not be controlled by the old structures or institutions of the religious orders of his day. He called for new wineskins, a new kind of faith community that could grow with his new message, so both would be preserved. "He was not simply introducing a new code of laws. For laws alone applied to the stresses of life would tear persons apart." [See: Commentary by Lloyd John Ogilvie and Myron S. Augsburger]

The Hebrew word *shûb* (pronounced *shoove*) occurs 1058 times in the Old Testament. It means to turn from one thing to another and is used to indicate a change of not just intention but also of behavior. This is the underlying principle of repentance. We turn away *from* our old direction at the same time we turn *toward* Christ's.

We are living in a tumultuous time. There is a lot of upheaval, and demands for change sound in streets around the world. You can't pour new wine into old wineskins. People demand the destruction of the old institutions that have oppressed them for centuries, from the obvious ways we've oppressed down to the not so obvious ways.

If you think the structure of oppression is not endemic and does not infect down to the societal bone, think for a moment how many meanings and derivatives we have for the word "master:" master bedroom, masterclass, MasterChef, mastery, schoolmaster, postmaster, to master something, the master... these are but a few. The full list is long, and this is just one root word. One root word that needs rooting out.

I don't know if the changes people are asking for are *new* wine, since people have been asking for justice since Abel's blood cried out from the earth. Maybe it has been the same wine over and over since the beginning of time. Maybe it keeps bursting the social and ecclesial seams because we have never sewn a proper wineskin. Maybe we do need to throw out the old wineskins. Instead of patching a bit of new onto the old again, we need to sew entirely new wineskins that can expand with the new life of love Jesus called for.

With that, I'm going to offer a couple of lessons that have proved worthy guidance to me over time, that at least appear to expand with the measure of love poured into them.

My mother had a passle of truths or lessons for us kids when we were growing up. Two of them that I heard on repeat, probably because I didn't listen, were, "If you mess it up, clean it up" and "It doesn't matter who messed it up. It only matters who cleans it up." As the sassy child, I remember pointing out the apparent conflict between those two which no doubt delighted my mother.

The first lesson (if you mess it up, clean it up) meant literally that the person who made the mess had best clean it up. It also meant that there were consequences to our actions.

The second lesson (It doesn't matter who messed it up; it only matters who cleans it up) sounds like it contradicts the first. But it doesn't. The first lesson still stands. If you make a literal mess, you clean it up to be considerate of others and to live in a clean space. If you don't, you will be living with some angry people in a messy house. If you make a figurative mess, you bear the consequences of your actions, but others might also be impacted by what you do. In either case, if you don't take responsibility and clean up the mess, someone else may have to. Their work doesn't absolve you of responsibility, and you may still be held accountable for your actions, but the important thing is that someone put in the effort to clean up the mess. Someone righted the wrong, made the space livable, and helped someone out.

A few weeks ago Rita Selin shared a statement from the Poor People's Campaign about how we need to do what needs doing even if we won't be noticed for it. All of us need to be doing the day to day work of creating a better world not because anyone will ever know we did, but because that is what you do and because that's how the work gets done. There is a recognition that we share humanity and therefore we share responsibility for making the world more livable, for cleaning it up.

The social cataclysms, the big, bold actions that seem to shift everything overnight are activities we like to attribute to heroes. That is an illusion that can perpetuate paralysis. How many centuries of pressure, weight, gravity, erosion, and micro-movements come before every major shift? Those micro-movements, that constant pressure - those are the people cleaning up the messes.

The path we are on now did not get here without persistent effort, without intention, and does not stay without continued reinforcement. If we want a new path for our world that is just as engrained as the one we are on now but that better resembles Christianity as Jesus taught it, we have to get off the one we are on and walk in a different direction. The more feet the quicker we beat the path. It will take focus, persistence, and humble, committed, determined hearts. But our act of faith will be met by God's grace. That's what it means when we say "nothing is impossible with God."

Do not be discouraged from thinking that what you do isn't heroic so it won't matter. That's the deception that keeps things the same. It *all* matters. We don't need heroes. We need human beings being strong for each other, cleaning up the messes, and walking that new path with and for each other.