

February 26, 2017
Transfiguration Sunday

“Don’t Just Do Something ... Sit There!”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Exodus 24:12-18 ~ Matthew 17:1-9

"Don't just stand there ... do something!" That's a familiar and urgent command designed to spur us on out of complacency into action! Peter essentially barks out this imperative in response to witnessing the induction of Jesus into the faith heroes "hall of fame" ... by virtue of his appearance on the mountain with Moses and Elijah ... not to mention his glowing transfiguration. Overwhelmed and awed by the whole event, Peter did what most of us do in pivotal and poignant moments ... *carpe diem!* Seize the day! Capture the moment! Let's make some dwellings ... let's get out our smart phones and take a photo ... post it on Facebook ... preserve it for all posterity. Let's get to work! C'mon, ya'll, get the stuff we need to make a dwelling ... boards, hammers, nails. James, John, don't just stand there with your mouths hanging open! Get busy! Do something!

Busy! Busy! Do this! Do that! Got to get to work! Produce! Achieve! It's built into the very fabric of our culture ... even our religion ... the Protestant work ethic and all that. And yet, it's the source of the most common lament I hear from parishioners and colleagues alike ... we're *tired!* We have bought into the myth of identity based on accomplishment ... and if we don't *accomplish* anything, then we don't know who we *are*.

Get on an airplane and strike up a conversation ... after exchanging names and saying where we're from ... the next thing we want to know is, "What do you do?" Our *doing* is who we *are*. So Peter's insistence on *doing* something is completely natural. But God's voice from heaven interrupts his babbling to say, "Hush! This is my son, the beloved! Listen to him!" Did you get that, Peter? Quit talking and doing ... and for once in your life ... simply pay attention. Listen!

To be sure, Christ's call to discipleship issues forth in all sorts of doing ...but only as our *response to* and not as *condition for* our identity as God's precious children. This identity comes only as gift ... pure grace ... free and undeserved. Yet we've all but forgotten ... or heaven forbid, never even known ... simply how to "be."

We want to know above all else what we're supposed to *do*, and surely there's a time and place for that. But we get so action-oriented that we often fail, like Peter, to be contemplative, spiritual, grounded and centered in the essential reality of God's presence in our lives ... simply to stand before ... and in awe of ... the mystery of God *so that* our doing can be meaningful ... purposeful ... and sustainable.

A formative work for my discovery of the necessity of spiritual renewal is a very small, little book by Henri Nouwen entitled Out of Solitude.

Nouwen writes: *“In solitude we become aware that our worth is not the same as our usefulness. We can learn much in this respect from the old tree in the Tao story about a carpenter and his apprentice:*

A carpenter and his apprentice were walking together through a large forest. And when they came across a tall, huge, gnarled, old, beautiful oak tree, the carpenter asked his apprentice: "Do you know why this tree is so tall, so huge, so gnarled, so old and beautiful?"

The apprentice looked at his master and said: "No . . . why?"

"Well," the carpenter said, "because it is useless. If it had been useful it would have been cut long ago and made into tables and chairs ... but because it is useless it could grow so tall and so beautiful that you can sit in its shade and relax."

Nouwen goes on:

“In solitude we can grow old freely without being preoccupied with our usefulness and we can offer a service which we had not planned. To the degree that we have lost our dependencies on this world, whatever world means--father, mother, children, career, success or rewards--we can form a community of faith in which there is little to defend but much to share. Because as a community of faith, we take the world seriously but never too seriously. In such a community we can adopt a little of the mentality of the Pope, who could laugh at himself. When a highly decorated official asked him, "Holy father, how many people work in the Vatican?" he paused a moment then replied, "Oh, about half of them I suppose."

The trick, as in most things, is balance. Knowing when to "do" and when and how to just "be." John's favorite poster is one that show a cat sitting on a couch ... the caption reads, "Sometimes I sits and thinks ... and sometimes I just sits!" We must learn to take our calling and our work seriously ... but not too seriously! To let go of our need to control ... to listen for the voice of God so that our actions aren't merely the proverbial running around like a hamster on a wheel but, instead, are true acts of discipleship that flow from a being that is formed in the awe and wonder of God's gracious love for us.

As for me, you might correctly accuse me of being wrong or misguided or even just plain crazy at times, but one thing I've never been is lazy. I work hard, really hard. I've always been an overachiever, and I've enjoyed the affirmation I've received from that. But I finally did learn several years ago that my motivations for working so hard were often far from noble ... maybe that's why one of my favorite buttons is one that reads, "Jesus is coming ... look busy!" And I suspect some of you have the same challenge. I often stayed busy because I felt the need to justify my life to God and to others and to myself. I wanted people to be impressed, to think, "I don't know how she *does* all that!" And here's the more difficult one. I often stayed busy because if I ever let up ... if I ever got quiet and contemplated where God was moving in my life and what God might be calling me to do ... then I might have had to deal with that ... and it might not be exactly what I wanted ... what I had planned. It just might have been calling me from outside of my comfort zone. I often stayed busy to fill the time and space ... not just to serve God ... but sometimes to block God's will and my discerning of it. I wasn't afraid that in the stillness God wouldn't speak to me. Oh no, I was afraid that God would.

Enter Peter on the mountain. He wants to get busy with his own agenda because he surely doesn't like the agenda Jesus has just introduced with the whole "take up your cross" thing. But the voice from heaven persists ... "This is my son, the beloved...listen to him!"... the same voice that beckons to us as we stand on the verge of this journey into the season of Lent ... into suffering ...to the cross ... for which this transfiguration is intended to prepare Jesus ... the disciples ... and us.

And what's interesting to me is that Jesus doesn't ... at least at this moment ... rebuke the disciples for their failure ... or call them to repentance ... or grant them forgiveness. Rather, he calls them to be raised and to shed their fear ... sending them forth into life restored and renewed.

Might we take a lesson from this? Might we, that is, literally "listen to him" and go and do likewise? So much of the Christian story has been constructed in almost entirely negative terms ... in terms, that is ... of what we are not. How many times have we heard that human nature is not good ... but rather wicked and depraved. And that sin ... understood as all those things we do wrong ... is evidence of our inadequacy. So grace ... from this point of view ... becomes only the antidote to sin ... grace that makes up for our lack ... grace becomes the divine "white out" that erases the marks against us on St. Peter's ledger.

But as I read this story, I'm struck that there is no mention of sin, depravity, or failure ... no description or condemnation of any kind of lack. Rather, Jesus speaks the word of resurrection that casts out fear ... creates unexpected possibilities ... and furnishes new life. Jesus speaks of what is and of what may be in the power of the Spirit ... not scolding or rebuking or chastising, but calling us to get up, to be raised, and to be bound by fear no longer.

Lent, which begins this coming Wednesday, calls us to rediscover our spirituality ... to be ... to quit our frantic babbling ... and to pay attention ... to consider who we are as dust ... apart from whose we are in our baptism ... God's precious children ... forgiven ... loved ... held. And only from that identity ... gifted and called ... and sent to do God's work in the world. If we don't get the "being" part ... then the "doing" will only be chaotic ... frustrated attempts at self-justification ... or else grounded in fear and devoid of any joy. If all your doing seems madness and pointless ... learn again to behold the mystery ... to enter a quiet place of awe. There will be more than ample opportunity and compulsion for living out our call to discipleship ... to taking up the cross. But in order to be able to do that ...at least for now ... don't just do something! Sit there!

May we pray?

Most gracious God, we give you thanks for all of the doings in our lives, the opportunities for meaningful work and vocation and relationships. Yet, Lord, we know that in those relationships, we must be grounded in an identity that comes only from you. Remind us of our baptismal calling as your precious children, loved, forgiven, and held; and from that identity, send us out to do your work. Help us to recommit ourselves to that identity so that our work for you might become meaningful in this Lenten season. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.