

Pace of Compassion

In February, my dear stepfather, Daniel died. His cancer, once gotten rid of, had returned in the late fall, and by early February he was gone. Just before he died, I went to Princeton for a youth ministry conference and had the privilege of listening to John Swinton. Swinton used the image of a three-mile-per-hour God¹ to speak about ministry with people with disabilities, slowing down to build mutual relationships and notice the sacredness of moments between and among us. Jesus walked at three miles an hour, slow enough to embark on relationships with compassion. Upon returning home and visiting dad and Daniel in hospital, it struck dad how Daniel had lived his life walking at three-miles-per-hour (a speed that occasionally annoyed dad, but a speed that nevertheless was beautiful). And it struck me, again, how death slows us all to that pace of compassion.

You might be thinking, “Oh great, the start of a new school year ... the start of hopes, anxieties, dates filling up on our calendars ... and the preacher’s talking about slowing down, about death, just when we’re gearing up, just when our pace is speeding up.” Please, stay with me, stay with Jesus.

Jesus didn’t want anyone to know of their whereabouts – this was time for him to be with his disciples, a teaching time, a relationship time. The first part of the teaching is Jesus’ second prediction of his death, which the “clueless” disciples in Mark do not understand, yet again. And they were afraid to ask for help. Instead, their fear led them to arguing about the importance of one disciple over another, boosting themselves up, leading to greater misunderstanding.

Greatness – ah, that’s where our grades fit in, right? Our hurry to finish studying, to get the best marks we can, to prove to our committees that we have what it takes to be in ministry. And then, when we “get there” and are serving as clergy, the hurry continues. Days full of running from a hospital visit to a bible study to a board meeting, times of feeling we are “accomplishing” ministry. Times when we look over at the lives and work of our classmates/colleagues and gladly think to ourselves, “Oh yeah, I have this thing figured out, so much better than they do.” Or we think, “Why are they receiving positions and praise? Surely, I’m a better

¹ Koyama, K. (1979). *Three mile an hour God*. London: SCM Press

minister.” Or we wonder, “Why haven’t I got my church practicing mission like they do?”

John Swinton writes specifically around disability, though I believe it can speak to us more generally. He says, “To whom should we compare our bodies? If our comparator is the high-speed, progressive, efficient, and self-sufficient body that Standard Average European Time demands, the disabled body can look only inadequate, deficient, slow, handicapped, abnormal. However, if the benchmark is the three-mile-an-hour God—a God who moves slowly and for whom creation is a long and timefull process—things look quite different ... The great cultural mistake that certain forms of disability draw to our attention is the assumption that speed and its equation with effective use of time is in any way ‘normal’ for those who perceive themselves as God’s creatures.”² The human impulse to compare oneself, to appear better than others (at least in our own minds) is something we need to negotiate, as did Jesus’ first disciples.

Rather than the disciples asking and raising their concern around his death, Jesus asks them. He sits with them. He speaks with them. Jesus does not insert himself into their argument about greatness. Rather, he challenges, yet again, both the world’s ordering of priorities and the disciples’ race to align themselves within those priorities. He tells them they must slow down, they must recognize and welcome a young child. They must receive a child, those on the margins of society, as he receives them. Slowing down to the speed of compassion, to the speed where we can recognize and witness the sacredness of God’s time in our world.

I remember as a student here feeling the dis-ease of hearing preachers coming here and saying things like, “Relationships are more valuable than grades ... deadlines are how society distances itself from the work of God,” and I thought “Right, but papers still need to be done! Learning goals need to be set!” It’s not an either/or thing, it’s not saying if we don’t value goals, we don’t value people – or vice versa. It’s both. It’s being able to hold tasks and relationships in creative tension as we seek to live as disciples of Jesus in God’s world.

² Swinton, J. (2018). *Becoming friends of time: Disability, timefullness, and gentle discipleship*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, p. 70.

Ministry is about meetings and schedules, administration and planning, writing and preaching. Seminary is about readings, papers, and schedules. The tasks of our call. It is also about relationship ... service ... vulnerability ... love – following our Teacher who lives this way with his disciples. Seminary is conversations with colleagues in the lunchroom about what’s challenging and changing us; it’s figuring out what communion/pastoral care/etc. means to us and our congregations; it’s taking time to learn. Ministry is sitting with a young family who have just been in a terrible car accident and being with them in the years ahead as they struggle and adjust to a new normal. Ministry is noticing when people are missing, noticing when people are facing grief or challenges, noticing enough to ask. Ministry is my stepfather always having time to hear my joys and my woes, visiting me in hospital and dancing at my siblings’ weddings. Ministry is my friend and Mennonite pastor being with my father, Daniel, and sister in the last moments of his life, singing to God for and with him, and holding space for tears and loving goodbyes.

And ministry brings us to the table, to Jesus’ table. At table, in the shadow of the cross, in the midst of time drawing to a close, Jesus takes time with his friends. Time to say goodbye. Time to offer thanks to God, to bless, to break, to pour, to give ... to give his life for our world. He ends his life as he lived his life with vulnerability and humility, in service and in love. In the same way, he rises from the tomb, showing once again that God’s time is different than our time. And that is wholly and holy love. May it be so that we receive ministry from Jesus and from his disciples and that we offer ministry with others in his name and in God’s time. Amen.

- Rev. Miriam Spies
Mark 9:30-37