

Faithful Improv

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Mark 1: 16-20 *The Message*

16: Passing along the beach of Lake Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew net-fishing. Fishing was their regular work. Jesus said to them, “Come with me. I’ll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I’ll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass.” They didn’t ask questions. They dropped their nets and followed.

¹⁹⁻²⁰ A dozen yards or so down the beach, he saw the brothers James and John, Zebedee’s sons. They were in the boat, mending their fishnets. Right off, he made the same offer. Immediately, they left their father Zebedee, the boat, and the hired hands, and followed.

When our daughter, Hope, graduated college, she was surprised and bummed out to learn that adults don’t have it all figured out. I think she felt that at some magic age, all of life – it’s complexities, its challenges, the sneaky way it surprises us – would somehow just make sense.

The nature of life is that things are always changing; that is no more true than it is today. Our bodies, the culture in which we live, the state of the church, even Oak Grove does not look like it did when I arrived a mere 7 years ago.

So much is different from the way it used to be – in every aspect of life -- the old solutions that worked once upon a time won’t address new challenges. Something new is needed.

I want to talk about what I’ll call faithful improvisation – engaging in new ways of doing things with a spirit of imagination and experimentation.

In a very real sense we improvise an awful lot. What I mean by that is that we cannot always prepare for a circumstance or a new event in our health, families, our work, so our reaction is in the moment. We build on what we know, and use our acquired wisdom to make (hopefully) good choices. All of us who live in or around the twin cities are masters of improvisation every time we step into a vehicle. It seems that you can never drive to a same destination twice without needing to find a new route due to road construction.

While I've felt more hopeful in general this week, the news brings me to tears almost daily – reports of three mass shootings on American soil in as many weeks, deadly and destructive wildfires in CA, children suffering in Yemen and Syria, cruelty, arrogance, and xenophobia out of Washington, and environmental predictions that are dire. This doesn't begin to include personal challenges that we all face as the simple result of being human and being part of relationships.

On top of this, I wonder often how the church will minister and proclaim Christ's good news in this particular culture of fear and division.

It helps to remember that Jesus came into just this kind of world himself, bringing hope. And Christ calls us again and again and again into new ways of being – to be new kinds of people.

When I learned that Bryan and the trio would be here today, it inspired me to think a bit about musical improvisation, and how it might inform our lives of faith as we face new horizons in our lives, and church. How approaching the future with a spirit of improvisation might encourage us.

And because I like to play with story, I viewed the text of Jesus' call to his disciples through the lens of improvisation. So this morning I want to highlight three observations I've had about improvisation in music and the biblical narrative that I hope will be helpful:

First, in order to improvise, to create something new in the moment, musicians and disciples need to **listen** deeply and carefully.

When improvising in a musical group, it is imperative that artists listen carefully to the music and to one another - to melody and harmony. When Bryan arrived this morning, he moved the piano so that he could see and hear the members of the trio better. I don't want to listen to a group where each member is playing their own thing without consideration for the other.

Jesus sees Simon, Andrew, James and John and speaks a word to them and they **listen**. Some scholars think that these fishermen may have heard stories or news about Jesus before actually meeting him, but we simply don't know. What we do know is that somehow what Jesus said was compelling enough for them to drop their nets and follow.

God speaks to us in myriad of ways and we either chose to listen or tune it out.

Prayer is one of the main ways we listen. I encourage it! Cultivating a strong spiritual practice of listening to God is essential as we face the future. One way that God

speaks to us, as God spoke to Elijah, is in silence. In a noisy and stressful world, silence is a linchpin of our faith. But God also communicates through music, art, other people, the community – God has access to unlimited resources.

Listening to other's stories and experiences is critical to expand our horizons and deepen our compassion. Listening well gives us confidence to try new things.

Each time our church welcomes new members, we listen to their needs, passions, concerns, and we change and we grow. We do not ask people to conform to us, but try to really understand and experiment in ways that are faithful to Jesus. Together, we listened, and formed the Rainbow Fellowship, we listened and gathered a caregiver's group, we listened and created Children's Church. It's exciting to see where our listening will take us next.

Second, improvisational musicians and the disciples both take a risk – they put themselves out there and become vulnerable. Vulnerability opens us to hurt, yes, but also to greater joy and deeper humanity.

I am not a musician, so improvising a solo sounds terrifying to me. You must be willing to risk failure if you are going to try something new. They can do it because of their familiarity with their instrument, their practice and learning.

Just last night, Brandon did some improvisation on his trumpet during *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*. (He told me I could tell all of you!) Brandon couldn't see the musical notes, so he took a risk and played off page.

The disciples in our story stepped out in a way that was vulnerable. They had no idea where following Jesus would take them, or how it was all going to turn out. The story seems to suggest that they just, quite literally, said, "okay, Jesus, here we go." Whether that is the report or it really happened, they left their comfort zone for the unknown. Yes was the first step.

People called to service of any kind take the risk of doing something new for the first time. One Veteran's Day I put together a panel of veterans of the Korean and Vietnam wars. To a person, they spoke about how little they understood about war and serving in the military when they answered the call to serve. They said yes and took the risk. I want to point out the photo of Carrie up here holding a baby, actively working for peace. It's one of my favorite photos. Carrie didn't know what being part of the army would require, but doing the work, taking the risk helped her feel alive.

Finally, improvisational musicians and disciples trust.

Musicians trust the music, themselves, one another, and their training. Improvisation with an instrument isn't about winging it – the printed music provides the jumping off spot for the artist to listen, step out, dig deep for emotion and then trust their hands, their mind and heart. Dick Nichols told me that he's heard Bryan play for 20 minutes using a single page of sheet music.

The disciples in our story today trusted Jesus and they trusted one another.

Together they traveled and participated with Jesus in all his ministry. While being with Jesus was totally new, Jesus was grounded in the Hebrew faith traditions, and it's likely that those fishermen were, too.

In the last several years I have sat in classes, engaged in discussions, participated in seminars, workshops, and phone meetings discussing the future of the church. (Not this church necessarily, but church in general.) Participation in mainline churches is declining, and some folks are worried. I am not.

In our own church, we are facing wonderful new challenges and opportunities. One night when I couldn't sleep last week, I counted 29 children from birth – 5 years old in our congregation, all without consulting a directory. (Thirty one now with the arrival of little Frank and Aiden.) This mini- baby boom with young families means that we may need to adapt the way we do things around here. We're not sure what that will look like yet, but we're listening. We also have 100 people over 80, lots of teenagers and are down a youth staff position.

Often, people ask me what will the church look like in 20 years? I don't know what we'll look like in 20 days.

But there's one thing I am sure of. Wherever we are, God will be there.

We do not know what the future holds, but we know that God holds the future.

Our daughter is 29 now and she has become adept at the improvisational nature of adulting in the 21st century. She was trained in theater in college and uses the principles of comedic improvisation in her Montessori classroom and in life.

We are in a new age. Old solutions won't address new situations – in society, in our lives, in our church. But we have hope. As we adapt and improvise faithfully, with an attitude of experimentation, may we listen deeply, put ourselves out there and risk our lives and reputations for the sake of the gospel, and trust that God is in it all.

AMEN