

Taking Up and Getting Up
Matthew 16:24-17:8
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Freddie was in awe of his dad, Fred. To little Freddie, it was magical, what his father could do...at the fireside after dinner....at the general store...in the feed lot...all Fred had to do was pull out his rolling papers and his bull Durham tobacco, and the story would start...everyone in Humboldt, Tennessee knew when Fred pulled out the tobacco, a story was coming...this was the days before television, during the depression when books were expensive and radios for the rich....not that anyone could get decent reception In Humboldt...

But Fred's tall tales were better than anything in a book or radio drama...he was a marvel...his stories had heroes and heroines, dastardly rich folks don noble poor folks, Bible stories, or dragons, or revenuers....and just when his stories would reach their climax, the gathered folks all tied up in knots for a resolution, Fred would say..."well, best be gettin' home...or best be gettin' to be" and they would practically squeal for resolution.

It was magical.

Freddie's mother, Ethel...yes...that's right Fred and Ethel...she wasn't nearly as exciting as Fred. She loved their family, but Freddie remembers thinking she wasn't nearly as much fun as dad...

But as he grew older, Fred noticed something...

Their family was struggling, badly, it was the depression...and his father wasn't able to do much with their 10 acres of farm...he wasn't good with his hands, he wasn't good with the crops, he'd get frustrated when something

would go wrong and disappear for days that Fred eventually learned were benders at the local saloon...

And Fred began to notice...his mother...she was turbine who took them to church...she was the one who got up every morning before they did to go to her job at the Buster Brown shoe factory to keep food on the table...she was the one who took in strangers... Tennessee was filled with wandering folks...tramps, they called them...homeless, we would call them today....

And his respect for his mother grew...and it was about the time he was ten that Freddie remembers figuring it out for the first time...

A story never fed a hungry family...a story, no matter how riveting, didn't give shelter to a destitute widow and her child....

Being dazzled was different than being moved, than being inspired, than actually doing something.

Freddie died four years ago this Wednesday, just shy of his 87th birthday. He became the Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock, the professor of homiletics at Candler school of theology at Emory University...Baylor University once did a poll of theologians from across the theological spectrum to have them name the greatest dozen preachers of the 20th century. He and two of his preaching students, former Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor and Presbyterian preaching and professor, Tom Long, made that list, the only instances where a mentor and any of their students were on the list.

His book, "As One Without Authority," is, in my view, the greatest book on preaching of the 20th century...

Fred borrowed the storytelling gene from his father...but the "get it done" gene from his mother. His sermons were filled with narrative, but never just to dazzle...but to inspire action. Fred might not tell you what exact action he was inspiring, but the fact that it would inspire something was never in

question. As Barbara Brown Taylor has put it, Fred didn't chew your food for you...but he gave you a gospel feast just the same.

Meeting Fred Craddock as part of the prize of winning an award in seminary was one of the great gifts of my education. He was a Protestant Yoda, 5'5" on a good day. And in his later years, Fred reflected a lot on his parents, including in the time we were together. He told the gathered group of pastors and three seminarians that his mother was a living embodiment of the call we hear in Matthew today to take up the cross and follow Jesus...to get up from even the most dazzling spiritual encounter of our lives...and get moving...don't be afraid Jesus says...but don't just sit there...

On this last Sunday before lent...as we prepare to follow Jesus to Jerusalem...to the cataclysmic events of Holy Week...we are invited to be in awe...The voice from heaven echoing that one we talked about back in January guarantees it..."This is my son, the beloved..." We hear echoes of the Baptism...but also another echo...because we know the whole story...the next mountaintop for Jesus will be a hill called Golgotha on the outskirts of Jerusalem...and the voice reminding us that this is God's son will not be from heaven...but from a Roman Centurion who will watch him die.

Jesus who inspires our awe will come down off of the mountain transformed...not simply that white light that Peter James and John seemed to see...but with a determination to face what is coming...with strength, with love and with grace.

We, like Peter, might be tempted to want to stay in the in-between...to revel in the warm glow of the Spirit...whether in a mountain top experience or in the safe confines of this church.

It is tempting to just remain in awe of a God who would love us enough to take on human form...to suffer as we suffer...to hurt as we hurt, to love as we love....and then be willing to offer himself so that we might know that love

wins...that life wins in the end...that grace and hospitality and justice and peace are signs of God's hope for us, call on us, desire for our living....

But as dazzling as that reality is...as unfathomably amazing as being loved individually and collectively by God is...if all we are is dazzled like Peter....

No child is fed by this story...

No family is welcomed out of homelessness, or addiction or prejudice...

Fred says his father gave him the words...little w....but his mother gave him the Word...big w...

She didn't dazzle with her stories...she changed lives with her hospitality, her kindness...her determination to care for her children.....

She was a cross-bearer...not joylessly...for Fred remembers her as a happy, lovely woman who loved people...who loved dancing around the house with her husband when he wasn't captive to depression and the bottle.

Craddock's father died at 63...a man whose body and spirit were broken by alcohol...and at the end...he had one message for his son...

Not tell stories...but tell my story...

At the end, Fred Sr. knew that his story was a cautionary tale...a tale of one who stayed up on the mountain...who let others carry the burden of life's daily crosses....and his story could motivate others to take up, to get up...and start really living, start really loving...

Moses had a mountain-top experience...and came down from the mountain to be with the Israelites in their fear and insecurity...and their quest for the promised land.

Elijah escaped to the mountain-top when the king sought his life...and from the crags of the mountain heard God's whisper sending him back into the fray with confidence not in himself, but in God..

The privileged white church in the America has spent a fair amount of time on the Mountain...for most of the 20th century, we were the dominant social force in the culture...yet another glowing face atop the city on a hill that was this nation during the American Century...Racism didn't affect us...much.... Misogyny didn't really get in the way of, well, the men who led the church for most of that century...and we certainly weren't burdened by poverty....

But step by step, we've been invited down off of the mountain...first by a loss of influence...and second by a surrender of our moral superiority...scandals and hypocrisy and frankly, a world that needed us to not be so distant and aloof have been chipping away at our mountaintop booth or tent, or whatever it was that Peter wanted to build...

This past week, our main-line Protestant siblings, the United Methodist Church, retreated to mountain-top...with pronouncements of increased enforcement of one particular version of Biblical moral purity...pronouncements that put the hundreds of LGBTQAI clergy at risk...that reject the families and marriages of Methodist members... Some are suggesting that an earthquake is coming that will sever the last global Christian communion as a result...

None of us can yet know what will happen with the Methodist church...but from our own experience, we know that they are in for a painful season...and they need our prayers and our solidarity as churches like First Methodist in our own community make it clear they will not go back up to the mountain of isolation and rejection of any of God's children...they, like us, have ministry to do among all of the rich diversity of God's wondrous human experiment.

As we prepare to start the Lenten journey again...to come off the mountain with Jesus and head toward our own Jerusalems...toward those places where our power and influence and resources and courage and faith will be needed, and perhaps tested...

Can we, like Ethel Craddock, keep our eyes open for the needs of those God has entrusted to our care...both inside and outside of our families of origin and faith...Can we keep telling the stories, our own stories...not just to enthrall, but to inspire, to empower...and link those stories with Jesus' story...and his teachings...

Jesus called the place where we are going the Kingdom of God...that's why our Lenten Theme this year is Bound for the Kingdom...because that's where the road that comes down off of the mountain goes...a place where people are in dire need of racial and economic justice, and hope, and a second chance, and community, and dignity...and love.

It's a risky place some might say...but if we look at the road that heads that way we will see the ruts of the crosses of those who have gone before us....Name your hero who traveled this road...their ruts are there...so let us give thanks for the awe inspiring, gracing love that gathers the church....but not stay here...but follow the one and the ones who are already out there chasing the shadows with the reflected light of the one who is truth and life and light...our friend, our brother...our Christ.....Amen.