

Broken Bread for Broken Faith

One of my very favorite professors over the course of my college and seminary studies lives right here in Bozeman. I enjoyed his teaching so much that I managed to take 6 courses from him when I was an undergrad student at MSU. It's probably safe to say that there is no other single college or seminary professor with whom I studied as much or more than I studied with Dr. Marvin Shaw. For any of you who have been in Bozeman for more than a dozen years or so, probably have had the chance to hear him speak from time to time, either in our adult Sunday school class or in other local venues. Dr. Shaw held the position of professor of religious studies at Montana State University for the bulk of his long career. And after retirement, he continued to teach and speak in many different and varied settings.

Over the last 20 years here, I have run into Dr. Shaw from time to time around town—always an occasion for recalling the positive and instrumental role he has played in my life and in the lives of many others. While I don't see him nearly as much now that he has advanced further into retirement, I do think of him frequently. Most often he comes to mind when I experience or observe a phenomenon that he wrote a book about. The book is entitled, *The Paradox of Intention: Reaching the Goal by Giving Up the Attempt to Reach It* (©1988 The American Academy of Religion, Scholars Press: Atlanta, GA). The book's title is the phenomenon of the paradox of intention.

This phenomenon can happen in big ways and in small ways. One small way could be when a child is learning to ride a bicycle. All the explaining in the world that a parent provides a young child about how it is that a bicycle will not fall over when ridden properly, will not necessarily result in success if the child tries to over think it or overpower the bike. And after perhaps many futile and failed attempts and the child has pretty much given up the idea of riding without training wheels, the child mounts the bike one more time and just shoves off and surprisingly finds that he can stay balanced. In this case, and in many others where the paradox of intention is experienced, the achievement of that which had been concluded as unattainable, results in delight and joy. In fact the sense of satisfaction can be even greater than had the goal been reached by sheer will power.

On a grander scale and one that comes from our own basic Christian understanding is the profound power of the gift of grace that demonstrates the paradox of intention. What I mean is that as much as we want to believe that we can be good enough or become good enough to merit God's favor, when we're honest with ourselves, we know that we come up short again and again and again. As many times as we try repeatedly, we simply cannot do everything in every way to meet the standard that will result in God's conclusion that we've earned our angel wings. Therefore, when we give up that pursuit of meritorious living, and we humbly acknowledge our failure and inability to make it on our own, we can find ourselves on our knees feeling defeated, demoralized and without hope. It is precisely in that giving up and giving in that God comes to us through Jesus and offers us that very thing we had been seeking on our own—forgiveness and reconciliation—a free gift given by way of God's son Jesus. Again, that realization and that acknowledgment results in tremendous joy, awe and wonder.

Well, of course, this grand example of Dr. Shaw's paradox of intention is what our Easter season is all about in the church. It's what we've celebrated now for that last 2 Sundays.

How has your Easter celebration been this year? Have you been swept up in the grandeur of the Easter music? Have you resonated with the call and response, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!"? Have you renewed your sense of awe and wonder over the amazing good news?

Perhaps some of you are wound up in, and right on track with this annual ritual of celebration.

Perhaps though there are others among us, perhaps you included, who find that you're not resonating with the message as completely as others are or as completely as you have in years previous.

And perhaps there are those who have yet to fully embrace the magnitude of it all, for one reason or another.

Well, have I got a story for you. Or I should say has Luke got a story for you.

Now to get back into the time frame of this story, we have to go back to that first Easter Sunday. The writer doesn't specify the reasons, but we can infer them as we learn about their whereabouts. Two of Jesus' disciples are walking *away from* Jerusalem. They were walking *away from* Jerusalem on the Sunday afternoon. This was the Sunday that followed the Friday when Jesus, their master and their teacher and their friend, had died on a cross at the hands of Roman soldiers. And this was the Sunday that in the morning some of the women in their band had returned from the graveyard to report that Jesus' body was not to be found in the tomb. Despite all this, and despite that the women had reported seeing angels who had said that Jesus had been raised from the dead as he had promised, these 2 disciples were walking *away from* Jerusalem, headed to a town about 7 miles away named Emmaus. What could be more demonstrable than voting with their feet—voting that they did not, could not and would not see that Jesus was anything but dead and gone.

Now to be fair to these 2 fellas, they had been through a lot over the last 3 years. Their time with Jesus had been more intense than we can probably imagine. This man Jesus had come into their lives totally unexpected. He essentially swept them off their feet as he called them to follow him, to accompany him in his surprising and unconventional ministry. They had witnessed and been part of some amazing events in which Jesus had performed miracles that were, well, unbelievable. But having stuck with Jesus as he confronted challenges and resistance, these disciples, like the rest of those among his followers, had come to believe that Jesus was who he said he was—the savior sent by God to redeem his people. Among the highs and lows in lives of people like the disciples, this coming to realize the truth of Jesus' identity has to be the highest of highs.

But you know, those disciples of Jesus were just as human then as we are human today. So while his followers had come to believe in him over the course of his ministry, when the chips were down, and they witnessed Jesus being taken away from them by soldiers, when they saw him go on trial before the Roman governor, when they witnessed his being sentenced to death, and when they were there to see Jesus die an agonizing death on the cross, they were shaken to their very core. And that faith that they had come to profess would seemed to have vanished into thin air.

So severely sullied was the faith of the disciples that they had become mortally frightened for their own safety. What was to stop the authorities from rounding them up as accomplices of Jesus who had been put to death as a troublemaker?

This is the condition in which the disciples found themselves 3 days after Jesus had died. Their faith was broken. So they headed out *away from* Jerusalem to walk to Emmaus. And along that journey, their broken faith prevented them from recognizing that the stranger who joined them in their trek was none other than Jesus himself—the risen Jesus.

We the readers of this story can take great delight as we read about how Jesus asks them to tell them what they're talking about, then has them tell Jesus that they simply cannot believe that the empty tomb reported by the women is anything but an empty promise. We further delight as Jesus

resumes his role of master teacher, and as he had done many times teaches these 2 disciples the amazing truths of the scriptures—all while they continue to fail to recognize him.

We the readers want to poke or shake those disciples and say to them, "It's Jesus! It's Jesus who is walking with you! Can't you see that Jesus is right there beside you?" But so broken is their faith that they persist in their despair.

However, there is something winsome about this stranger that leads the 2 to persuade him to join them for their overnight stop. Perhaps this stranger was a sufficient distraction from the pain and anguish and brokenness that they were experiencing. So distracting was this disguised Jesus that these 2 disciples maybe gave up, at least for a bit, their pursuit of trying to figure out what had happened.

From all the unfamiliarity of the last several days, from a state of disorientation, the disciples and the disguised Jesus sit down at a table to eat an evening meal to mark the end of their day and to refresh their bodies for the night so that they could face a new day tomorrow.

You know there is a special human intimacy associated with eating together with another person or persons. Another one of my professors, Dr. John Burkhardt, made a big deal of this intimacy in eating together. While we can drape all sorts of fancy trappings on eating together, adding ambience and color and flavors and such. But when it comes right down to it, eating is one of the most basic activities in which we engage to stare down and stave off the death that awaits each of us. And when we eat together we're bonded together in a special way as we share our common pursuit of facing down death.

Over the course of his 3-year ministry, Jesus shared countless meals with his followers. Those meals would have been occasions for deepening the intimacy that each of the disciples felt toward Jesus and one another.

It's no wonder then that when Jesus, who was sitting unrecognized, with the 2 disciples, took bread (in the same fashion as he had done countless times), blessed it (as he had done every time), and broke it and gave it to them (as always). Then, they finally recognized him only to have him vanish from their presence. Joy and wonder and praising was the result. Their broken faith was restored with broken bread.

What a wondrous case of the paradox of intention.

We share meals over and over and over again with others. For some, it is most often the same companion or companions with whom meals are shared. For others it can be various groupings of people depending on the day or circumstances. These occasions of eating together can be reminders of our relationship with God through Jesus, as much as they are times of strengthening relationships with others.

In our worship life together, we share a sacramental meal together regularly—usually the first Sunday of the month. But it need not be holy communion, within the liturgy or worship of the church to recognize Jesus in our midst.

Today, we are experiencing bread in multiple ways. Perhaps you could smell bread as you entered the sanctuary today. In just a bit, each of us will have the opportunity to take a piece of bread and examine it, feel it, smell it and then eat it, after breaking it. This is not a communion meal in the strictest liturgical sense, but it is an intimate experience of eating together.

May our time of sharing broken bread today be an opportunity to see and encounter the risen Christ in our midst in our day.