

A man born in the middle of World War II remembers the tent revivals of his childhood like it was yesterday, but the memories of the same kind of night repeating itself years on end blends all the summer nights together. The same message, the same songs, the same feeling, hovering over them, circling around over the tent. The shouting, sweating preacher in the hot southern summer, under a tent that held in the humidity like a greenhouse. Stuck to the hard metal folding chair. Paper fans and handkerchiefs. The dust of a parking lot not yet paved. Hymns from the Second Great Awakening hanging in the thick air like a promise that he wished felt a little lighter than the southern humidity.

The music gets more dramatic. The piano chords tremolo. Voices quiver with vibrato. The preacher hits the main point:

“Where are you going when you die? You could walk out of here tonight and cross the street and get hit by a car. And where would you end up? Do you know? Where are you going when you die?”

And that was probably a Presbyterian minister. The man always said it didn't matter which Protestant denomination's tent revival it was, whether Baptist or Methodist or Presbyterian or Lutheran or Congregational, “As far as the tent revivals and altar calls go, we Christians were all the same in the '50s,” he said.

I remember once hearing another Presbyterian pastor call it vulture evangelism. They circle over you, reminding you that you are going to die, over and over and over again, until you decide that you will join their church, walk their way, follow their theology, let them baptize you, even if you've been baptized already. They circle around, waiting for you to give into their message, their static, looming, heavy message that if you don't know where you're going when you die, you are likely not going to a good place. The message doesn't change. The method doesn't really change, either. It just circles above, around and around again, until another vulture joins the circle or until death takes hold. All that matters is the slowly aging and dying body below them.

Vulture evangelists are circling too high and distant to concern themselves with what's happening to others while they're still alive. They don't bother to notice much what people are doing while still living. And they won't bother to ask how people are doing in their everyday lives, either. They don't know how to get close to others until death is the topic close at hand.

Disciples of Christ preacher Fred Craddock reminds us well that “Most of us live a long time after our baptism.” And I would add a reminder that Jesus Christ has been resurrected. Jesus Christ has defeated death, and nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ, and Jesus

spent a lot of time teaching us how to live and love one another. He's still alive, and so are all of us sitting here. That's not to say we shouldn't have some degree of concern for what happens when we die, but I'm reminded of some words Jesus said when he taught his disciples how to pray, particularly how we ask God for God's reign to come and God's will to be done here on earth as it is in heaven. In fact, what he called the Greatest Commandment on which all the law and the prophets hang tells us to love God with all we are and to love our neighbor as our self.

Jesus doesn't circle above us, preaching the same thing in the same words over and over again. He doesn't stay high above us, just keeping an eye out for the day to call us home. That's not at all how he shows up to his disciples or anyone else he encountered. He sticks around and points people's attention to real, living things like lilies and birds and grass. He sits down with his friends to eat dinner in the home of an outcast. He listens to a woman from a different culture who has a sick daughter and heals her. Even as he faces death, he asks his disciples to stay with him in the garden to watch and pray. And he sends Mary, who stays with him all the way to the cross, to the twelve to tell them he's alive again and they should go meet him on a hill in Galilee, even though they weren't there to see him suffer and die or emerge from the tomb. I'm convinced that Jesus is quite concerned with what's going on in our living.

And the words he leaves the eleven disciples with in the Gospel of Matthew tell them to go out into the world and make more disciples, to live out there, with other real, living people, not to hover over the same spot, circling over and over again, just to gather more vultures in those static, flying circles. He sends them out. He tells them to baptize people into life, not to drown people with the prospect of death. He tells them to teach people all that he commanded them, summed up in a commandment to love God and neighbor and self. A commandment that hangs lightly on the heart, a commandment that stays the same yet looks different for each person encountering it. A commandment that travels with them wherever they go and yet takes shape in different ways for each new culture, each new town, each new child of God they come across. A commandment that can also be taught to them anew as they encounter other faithful people along the way.

I imagine the eleven disciples going along their way, wandering around the Mediterranean world of their day, remembering all of what Jesus had commanded them, not just in word but mostly in how he lived. All too often, we get caught up in needing to define the Greatest Commandment, but it would serve God's mission so much better if we could live so that others could describe the Greatest Commandment. When the Greatest Commandment is embodied, God is not an intellectual problem to be solved for salvation in death. When the Greatest Commandment is embodied,

we see more fully that God comes with abundant love and abundant life to be experienced. When the Greatest Commandment is embodied, we see a full picture of all that Jesus commanded the disciples and sent them out to teach.

Back to the man at the start of our story. His uncle's alcoholism got the uncle a lot of rides in police cars over his adult life. The somewhat comical "town drunk" stories often ended up as little blurbs in the morning paper, and his family used to have a few of those lying around for the sake of family chuckles or sometimes for a more serious, gentle reminder that alcoholism is something to watch for. He had a bad habit of driving under the influence. His drinking was definitely a problem, and no matter what the man's father and the father's other siblings tried, the drunk uncle still ended up getting dropped off by the cops on various family doorsteps after a night of public intoxication.

The uncle didn't go to church. And there was probably a good ol' time religion explanation going around town that that was why he was the way he was. But you and I know well that alcoholism isn't caused by not going to church. And I sometimes wonder if those vulture evangelists contributed to his decision to frequent a different kind of community than that which a congregation would provide.

And then came Reverend Anderson. He was a different kind of pastor than the Presbyterian church the drunk uncle's nephew and his parents

were accustomed to. Rev. Anderson knew the nephew's parents well because his mother, the sister-in-law of the drunk uncle, was one of the first women ordained as an elder in her presbytery. Rev. Anderson came along much later, after the nephew became an adult. Rev. Anderson grew to know of the drunk uncle through his nephew's parents and asked the drunk uncle's brother if it was alright to visit him. So he started going to his house and sitting with him and just talking. They just had conversations. By all accounts, they never talked about alcohol or addiction or sin. They just talked.

And you know what? After a while, for whatever reason, the once-drunk uncle decided the bottle wasn't for him anymore. There were better things for him to do. He had some living left in him, and he might as well live it, right? He didn't become a completely new person. He never got particularly healthy, either; he didn't stop smoking until the day he died. And he never did go to church. But somebody listened to him. Rev. Anderson didn't vulture over him until he gave into some scary claim about the afterlife. He didn't try to reason with him and intellectually convince him that God's love was a problem to be solved or a paradigm to be defended. He just embodied the love of Jesus and talked to him like a friend. Rev. Anderson read the scriptures enough to remember that Jesus commanded him to love God and neighbor, enough to remember that Jesus sat with people and listened to

them, believed their experiences, and simply befriended them. He taught the drunk uncle everything Jesus commanded, not by reasoning with him, but by simply embodying the Greatest Commandment.

Maybe that's why that former drunk's sister-in-law listened to Rev. Anderson when he started preaching more courageously in the late 1960s. In the thick of the demonstrations for civil rights in Memphis, Rev. Anderson and his family marched, wrote their representatives, and lived out the values they had come to espouse. The reverend's family was learning and living a different message than most people in their city. But he did not keep the message to himself. That message needed to enter the congregation he served, in one way or another, and he knew it. He did meet people where they were. But he neither desired to leave them where they were nor move people along at a pace inequivalent to the societal emergency happening around them.

Rev. Anderson was bringing a message that liberated, opened doors, and welcomed those who were never welcomed by white people before. This new way of looking at the Bible led in the direction of integration. And as he preached and marched and taught the good news, everything that Jesus had commanded his disciples, he and his family began to receive threats for not being that white moderate Dr. King talked about in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail. His children were

bullied in school. His family started to fear for their lives.

But he kept preaching. His family kept praying. He kept getting sent out and teaching and embodying the love of the Greatest Commandment, all that Jesus had commanded.

And meanwhile, that woman, that elder, that mother of the man in the tent revival who started our story, who pulled her daughter away from a Black woman at the lunch counter sometime in the '50s, that sister-in-law of the town drunk began to grow in her discipleship. I would even say she finally repented and believed the Gospel. Whether it started out as a feeling that the pastor shouldn't be receiving threats or a deeper sense that she had been receiving and enacting more vulture messages than Jesus messages, what Rev. Anderson was preaching fell upon her heart and took root.

So she and her husband invited Rev. Anderson and his family over. He sat on their backyard swing and wept over the splinters in the church. He sat at their dinner table and vented about the threats and the bullying. He also shared the message, the good news, and that's when the woman began truly living into her call as an elder, as a disciple. The Holy Spirit was telling the church something, telling her something, and she believed that when the Church's leaders are following the Spirit, her charge was to receive the message and live it out. Maybe she and her husband learned how to listen to

Rev. Anderson because he listened to them – about the Great Depression, about the War, about her husband's alcoholic brother. And their listening to him, their embodying of the Greatest Commandment, which he had originally embodied to them, allowed him to feel empowered in his ministry, even though ultimately his ministry of teaching all that Jesus commanded ended his ordained career. But he still knew that Jesus was with him always, until the end of the age.

And at Rev. Anderson's recommendation, that woman's daughter transferred her membership to an integrated church, one that made disciples who taught everything Jesus had commanded them by embodying the Greatest Commandment. The woman and her husband followed their daughter there and continued a fruitful and radical ministry for many decades as God sent their church into the community.

And the woman's son who started our story, the one who grew up suffering through those vulture evangelism tent revivals, was sent out from that church to worship at a Black Presbyterian church in Memphis. Discipleship sent him to the Philippines to serve and befriend people with the Peace Corps. And discipleship sent him into Mason Temple COGIC to hear Dr. King's last speech. He recalls that night as a sweaty, stormy night, with people packing the room to the gills, standing room only, people cheering chaotically, being one of only nine or so white people in the

room, an atmosphere entirely different from what he grew up in – but wait – maybe that wasn't too far off from the sweat and noise and passionate preaching of the tent revivals – except for the content of the message, that is.

He got sent out from those tent revivals because someone remembered everything Jesus had taught. Someone remembered the Greatest Commandment. Someone remembered that Jesus remains with us. Someone remembered that Jesus sends us out. The circling, distant, death-focused vulture evangelism of the past was not adequate to hold all the suffering and pain and passion for abundant life that the world held. No, someone needed to remember all that Jesus commanded them. Someone needed to live all that Jesus commanded them. And when that kind of news gets spread, when that kind of disciples are made, when they are baptized in the name of God the creator of all, Jesus the very embodiment of God, and the Holy Spirit the sustainer and change-maker, when they are taught all that Jesus commanded them – life abundant and love for God and love for neighbor and love for self – that is when the church grows into the band of disciples God calls it to be, sent to and for the world. Amen.