

Lessons from a Church Van
Matthew 20:1-16; Exodus 16:2-15; Philippians 1:21-30
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The bulk of my ministry over the past decade and a half has taken place in a church van. I've driven church vans in 19 different states and the District of Columbia. I've driven them to ball games, funerals, a U2 concert, and the Great American Eclipse of 2017. I've driven church vans through the Lincoln Tunnel, across the George Washington Bridge, to the Magic Kingdom, and down Bourbon Street. I've gotten them stuck in the snow and in the mud. I have run out of gas in a church van, blown a tire in a church van, and lost an alternator in a church van (those last two happened at the same time). Unlike one of my colleagues, I have never been pulled over in a church van...but I have spent a lot of time behind the wheel of those unwieldy vehicles. You might be surprised that a church van can function as sacred space.

Among my favorite lessons learned in a church van was this one. I believe this was a rafting trip, and we were trying to get out of Raleigh on a Friday afternoon, which is always challenging. We came to a place where I-40 narrowed from three lanes to two. I was in the lead van, and I knew the lane change was coming and merged into the heavy traffic early, without much problem. The driver of the second van, a youth mom, was less experienced. I watched in the rearview mirror as the van lingered in the right lane for longer than it should have, watched somewhat amusedly as the traffic refused to give way, and let out a little gasp as the van jerked and lurched its way over to the other lane. It was not the smoothest transition, but it was a largely unremarkable event.

Later, the driver of the other van told me that, from the inside of her van, it had been nerve-racking. "Did you see that?" she asked. "How do you maneuver these things in that kind of traffic?!" I nodded in agreement as she continued. "I didn't know exactly what to do, so I told all of the kids in my van 'sometimes, you just have to commit,' and then we just went for it!"

It was a simple, easy-to-overlook experience...but it was one with several important faith lessons wrapped inside it, lessons I think about almost daily, lessons that are also critical in the scriptures we read today.

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The gospel reading this morning is one of those passages that puts our American capitalist work ethic squarely at odds with the moral of the story. It is a parable that was designed to do this despite the fact that it was presented 2000 years before the American capitalist work ethic existed. Jesus tells this story to an audience extremely concerned with justice and fairness. He knows that they will balk at the idea of disparate pay, just as we balk at that idea now. In 2020, the vineyard workers would unionize and achieve not only an agreed-upon hourly rate unaffected by race, class, or gender but also a dental plan. Some things don't really change: when we see inequity, we react strongly.

Clearly, there's nothing wrong with equity, or with fairness, or with dental plans. But that's not the point of this story. This is not a parable where Jesus is concerned with fairness.

Actually, I'm amazed at how little Jesus seems concerned with fairness. When I would take the youth to Kure, some years we would do a whole week on the phrase "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer." Like today's parable, it is a complicated passage. It sounds like Jesus is undoing the Law of Moses, overriding it...and it sounds like he is telling us to be completely unconcerned with what is fair, because "an eye for an eye" sounds pretty even.

If any of you youth remember the lesson from that week, we landed on this. The Law of Moses only seems like it's concerned with fairness. It's actually a warning against vengeance, a call to empathy. The preexisting practices during Moses' time—basically, something like "a life for an eye"—meant that teaching "an eye for an eye" was actually a call for people to be more empathic, to be more aware of what the other person was feeling. Jesus takes that same idea to the next level. "Be so in touch with where the other person is that you don't even strike back when that person hits you."

The vineyard workers can claim to be concerned with fairness, but they seem pretty selfish. They aren't trying to look at the situation through anyone else's eyes. From their own point of view, they want more and feel they deserve more. They can argue for this in the name of fairness, but not in the name of empathy.

Jesus' lessons—the two lines in Matthew 5 and the parable from today—teach us to tout empathy more than fairness. These are lessons that suggest that, until you've driven a church van in 5:00 Triangle traffic, you don't really know what it's like...and lessons that suggest that, if you see a church van on I-40, you should slow down and let it in front of you even though you don't really want to be stuck behind it. They are calls to truly listen to each other, with ears, mind, and heart. They are instructions to put actual people over ideals or ideologies. The workers in the vineyard never understand that.

I'm not entirely convinced we understand it now. We have moments of empathy, and we pat ourselves on the back in those moments, but those moments seem fleeting and far from an appropriate description of normal society. Often, our championed moments of empathy are actually moments where we are primarily concerned with fairness or capitalism or security, and we masquerade as someone who cares about people when we are actually more like the vineyard workers concerned with principle. Again, there's nothing wrong with principle...but Jesus makes it pretty clear that principle without empathy is misguided at its best and dangerous at its worst.

Far too frequently, much like the vineyard workers, we promote selfishness in the name of principle...selfishness, of course, being the exact opposite of empathy.

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The vineyard workers react this way for many reasons, but one significant reason is because they lack control. I have preached before that we tend to idolize the idea of control, elevating it to a point where it supersedes more admirable qualities. We even fall in love with the illusion of control, convincing ourselves that if we live our lives a certain way, we dictate our own destinies...when the truth is that certain elements, significant elements, remain far beyond our realm of regulation. One thing you learn driving a church van is that you might feel like you're in control...but, in the end, you're at the mercy of others on the road and of the rubber of the tires and of nature itself.

The vineyard workers are just workers, but after one day on the job, they believe that they belong in management. (They are mistaken.) Even more than desiring fairness, even more than craving money, they are in love with the idea of being in control.

In the story from Exodus this morning, the Israelites find themselves in a similar position. They have never been in control, living their whole lives enslaved, but Moses has given them a taste of what it feels like to determine their own paths.

The Israelites have suffered through the oppression of the Egyptians. They have weathered the plagues that afflicted all of Egypt, left the only land they'd ever called home, only to be tracked and chased by the Egyptian army...and then, somehow, they escaped that threat as well. They have been through a lot...but at this point, they should be filled with anticipation and hope about this Promised Land that is awaiting them.

Instead—and this is a theme throughout Exodus—they (like the vineyard workers) complain. Unable to focus on what lies before them, they are only able to bemoan what doesn't exist in their present. The minute they get hungry, they are wailing that it would have been better to have died in Egypt than to have to travel through the wilderness.

It's a little bit mind-blowing. They make it through slavery, infanticide, locusts, lice, a cruel dictator, and a pursuing army...and when they get hungry, they wish they were dead.

The Israelites are complaining because they are succumbing to fear. It's strange that they haven't been afraid before, but often people in a place of total subjugation don't experience true fear because they have no hope. It's only after a glimmer of hope is introduced that they start to be afraid that they could lose it.

This is how, wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites encounter fear for the first time. They have finally broken free...but they are afraid it will not end as promised. They are afraid that the God that brought them this far will lose interest and forget about them, or will turn on them, or will abandon them. The fear is enormous, larger than the wilderness in which they wander, and it pushes them to complain. God attempts to assuage their anxieties and provides for them...but as the story of Exodus continues, they never really get over that fundamental fear. They never really stop complaining.

The Israelites are afraid because they are careening out of control. (In case you're wondering: yes, this is also what it can be like to drive a church van.) The Israelites don't even have control over where their food comes from. Their lack of control pushes them to a place of trepidation and blinds them from empathy. While the vineyard workers articulate their lack of control as an injustice, the Israelites can only exclaim in fear...and in many ways, the expression of fear is worse. It has made them totally unaware of anything around them, of the shelter already provided, of the treasured reward that awaits, of anything other than an empty belly.

If we are sometimes apt to hide our lack of empathy, our selfishness, behind principle, then we abandon that façade when we grow fearful. Fear makes us think that we are allowed to claim outwardly our selfishness.

I grew up in an era where fear was commonly used to manipulate people toward faith communities. Fearmongering was inextricably connected to church. For most of our young people, I think, this has not been the case...but just in case it has been, let me state emphatically that fear and faith simply do not go together.

Faith communities, at least the ones I've been involved with, have steered away from using fearmongering...but unfortunately our world has become more fearful. Fear is a regular political tactic, a tool of the press, an advertiser's best friend, a constant on social media, and a societal norm. We are afraid of change, of putting our children in a place of responsibility, of getting sick, of getting shot, of letting someone into a public building, of taking risks. We no longer attempt to take risks wisely; we attempt to eliminate risks altogether.

We are living lives perpetuated by fear...and, again, fear and faith do not go together.

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It's overly critical to castigate the Israelites as people lacking faith. They've just gone through the intense worship experience of Passover, have packed up their meager belongings to travel across a desert, and have crossed a sea where there is literally no turning back. They have faith.

But they are still afraid...because they haven't quite committed to that faith.

We can tell that they haven't committed because they are looking backward instead of forward. When they get hungry, their words are not "milk and honey in the Promised Land" but rather "pots of meat in Egypt." They haven't quite let go of the life they lived in Egypt, miserable as it was. They haven't quite committed to the life God offers.

The driver of the van behind me on that rafting trip was right. Sometimes you just have to commit.

It is a commitment that takes a lifetime to achieve. It is one of those commitments that we have to make each day, over and over again, with each breath. Sometimes our commitment slips because we are selfish or fearful. Sometimes it slips because we get distracted by other good things, by principles or ideals, but this is not a commitment to self or to principle.

It is a commitment to others in the form of empathy. It is the act of conceding control, of embracing humility and vulnerability. It is, in highway terms, yielding. The Israelites, the vineyard workers, and each and every one of us are called to put the needs of others ahead of our own, truly to look at the world through someone else's eyes without inserting our own biases into the situation, not to feel *like* they feel but instead to feel *what* they feel. It is a crucial, excruciating challenge, extremely important and extremely difficult. I've tried to put "empathy" into words, but the simple truth is that words will inevitably end up clichéd and undercooked. But we have all encountered this type of empathy, this compassion and kindness, this understanding. The key is to go forth and make it pervasive. To commit to it.

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I think one of the best examples of how to commit to empathy like this is revealed in the third reading this morning, Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. A lot of my divinity school classmates didn't really care for Paul. Paul's writing is often convoluted and cumbersome. Paul's attitude is sometimes hard to stomach—he can come off as remarkably arrogant, which is a quality that tends to put us off more than anything else. It is another form of the antithesis of empathy.

Despite all of this, I always liked Paul, and a big part of why I liked Paul had to do with reading the book of Philippians. It's a letter Paul writes near the end of his life, when he's unsure about what comes next. He's in prison and has no reason to expect to escape from prison. Focusing on his own life, he has every reason to be despondent, every reason to complain.

Instead, the word "joy" punctuates his letter. It is a calm joy, a peaceful joy, an excited contentment. Paul—arrogant, demanding, controlling Paul—is showing us another side...a side that, I like to think, comes closest to his true colors. It is a joy that connects him deeply, permanently to the church in Philippi. This is a Paul brimming with empathy. Despite his imprisonment, despite his likely weariness, he is genuinely joyful...because he has committed to feeling what the Philippians feel.

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I will actually kind of miss driving those church vans. (I will not miss driving the bus at all.) From the driver's seat of a church van, everything is always the same: the steering wheel rests under your hands, the pedals at your feet, the preset radio stations a slight reach away. It's extremely familiar. But the van takes you to a new place every time, through different climates and civilizations, to undergo new experiences and to make new memories.

Best of all, the van does it for a group of people all at once. The dozen or so people inside a van are all in it together. It doesn't matter where they live, or what they packed, or what they believe. They are united and moving forward, together. Ideally, their hearts are at least somewhat as united as their bodies. It makes for a much smoother trip, and it makes for a whole lot more fun.

Sometimes, in preparation for a youth trip, students would want to know who else is going, or what the theme was going to be, or where we were staying, or any other of a thousand little details before deciding whether or not to come. My response then, and now, was always the same: "just sign up." Just commit to the group...and you'll be rewarded.

Like the Israelites, we are often afraid to commit. Like the vineyard workers, we are often too selfish to commit, or we hide behind principles instead of embracing actual people. Like both of those groups, we want to be in control instead of committing to the group. Like early Paul, we are often too arrogant to admit we would benefit from this kind of commitment. But, with time and persistence, we might end up like the Paul in Philippians: willing to feel what someone else feels instead of clinging to our autonomy. When we get there, consistently, there is no telling where the van will take us.

Drive on.