

**PROPER 20, RCL, YEAR B**  
**Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37**  
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There's a quaint, heart-warming story by an anonymous author called "The Hippie and the Deacon." Anyone ever heard of it? It goes something like this:

His name was Bill. He was in his early twenties, and had wild hair, and he wore a t-shirt with holes in it, blue jeans, and no shoes. He had become a Christian while attending college.

Across the street from the campus was a church with a very well dressed, very conservative congregation. They wanted to develop a ministry to the students but were not sure how to go about it.

One Sunday, Bill decided to go there. He walked in with no shoes, jeans, his t-shirt, and wild hair. The service had already started and Bill started down the aisle looking for a seat. The church was completely packed and he couldn't find one. By then, people were really looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one said anything. Bill got closer and closer to the pulpit, and when he realized there were no seats, he just squatted down right on the carpet. By then the people were really uptight, and the tension in the air was thick.

About that time, the minister realized that from 'way at the back of the church, a deacon was slowly making his way toward Bill. Now the deacon was in his eighties and he had silver-gray hair, and a three-piece suit. A godly man, very elegant, very dignified, very courtly. He walked with a cane. As he started walking toward this boy, everyone was saying to themselves that you can't blame him for what he was going to do. How could you expect a man of his age and background to understand some college kid sitting on the floor in church?

It took a long time for the man to reach the boy. The church was utterly silent except for the clicking of the man's cane. All eyes were focused on him. You couldn't even hear anyone breathing. The minister couldn't begin to preach the sermon until the deacon did what he had to do.

And now they saw this elderly man drop his cane on the floor. With great difficulty, the old man lowered himself and sat down next to Bill, and worshiped with him—so Bill wouldn't be alone.

Everyone was choked up with emotion.

When the minister gained control, he said, "What I'm about to preach—you will never remember. What you have just seen—you will never forget. Be careful how you live. You may be the only Bible some people will ever read."

Isn't that a beautiful story? It brought a tear to my eye when I first read it. But then I started thinking about it and the more I thought about it, the more annoyed I became. While of course, what the old man did was a faithful gesture of discipleship and true hospitality, and the adage that the minister told the congregation about being the only Bible some people will ever read is true, what rankled me was how unrealistic the story was for today's time and especially in the context of where we live. It is a story of comfortable discipleship. Of course, every one of us would be welcoming to a stranger that came through our doors! In the story, the stranger would make it easy for us—they would be coming to us—but that is not the reality we live here at St. Stephen's in Seattle. We have a wonderful neighborhood around us and most people have never set foot here, nor are they interested. Besides, it would be daunting for a non-churched person to come to church by themselves—not knowing anyone or how we wonderful Episcopalians do

church. Because we do church, don't we? In a marvelously beautiful and confusing way to an outsider.

So, there's our quandary. People like Bill, from the story, aren't coming to us, so we have to reflect on how we can go to them. That's what Jesus is modeling and asking us throughout the Gospels and this is a tough call. It taps into some of our most primal fears—fear of the other, fear of being hurt, fear of having to share resources that may feel scarce. It's difficult to be wise, prudent, and compassionate when we are afraid and in this week's Gospel, we are reminded again of how much we are like the disciples.

When Jesus starts talking again about his impending death, the disciples are afraid and they exhibit a couple of defense mechanisms that we would call in the psychotherapy world: denial and deflection. They deny that Jesus is going to die and instead take up a petty argument about who is greater. Fear paralyzes and drives you to look out only for yourself. The relationship between fear and faith is a tense one. Compassion and competition cannot coexist. Think about it this way, if the disciples are competing with each other to see who is the best, then the people to whom their discipleship is extended are nothing more than means to an end. The disciples become not servants, but exploiters.

Jesus uses the example of welcoming a little child to help them understand how broad and radical acceptance of "the other" must be. Children in that culture had no rights nor any reason to be respected. Jesus calls the child to him in order to show that the child is worthy of respect and compassion. This frames his call to discipleship—that everyone should be welcomed in the same way. This welcome is tied to really welcoming Jesus into your life and opening yourself to the transforming work of God. It is tied to faithfulness. Author and blogger David Lose puts it this way: "Jesus' response to our fears and anxieties is an invitation not to faith as intellectual assent—as if believing in God somehow prohibits fear—but rather to faith as movement, faith as taking a step forward (even a little step) in spite of doubt and fear, faith as doing even the smallest thing in the hope and trust of God's promises."

In light of this, it is easy for us to get caught up in busy-ness and doing things that, while they may be good, are not the product of faithful discernment. There's a great Anthony de Mello story about disciples who were always asking for words of wisdom. Their Master said, "Wisdom is not expressed in words. It reveals itself in action." But when he saw them plunge headlong into activity, he laughed and said, "That isn't action. That's motion." Deep stuff.

As Christians, our actions outside of these walls may be the only Bible someone ever knows. In embracing our Baptismal Covenant's call to respect the dignity of every human being, we will be called into fearful places where faithful action must be rooted in discernment. We are called to be contemplatives in action, as the Jesuits say. There are many opportunities to go and sit with the Bills of the world outside here. We have programs that you can connect with through our outreach group and intergenerational ministries. Many of you have causes that are dear to your heart and are passionate about. Perhaps it's time to not just intellectually support them, but instead move forward with a small step of faith to put yourself in the game.

You have been given a colored sheet of paper this morning that I want to invite you at this time to write down a single fear on one side and as we continue to pray during the rest of the service, I invite you to write down one faithful action you might undertake this week on the other side. It doesn't have to be directly related to the fear—when we act in faith in any way, it bolsters our confidence to do it more.

God is still at work, my friends, not vanquishing all our fears, but keeping us from being overwhelmed by them and helping us to move forward in faith. May our faithfulness bring us to the strangers in our midst and may we all take another step toward a deeper relationship with God together. AMEN.