

Kingdom of Heaven Reached the Long Way Around

Psalm 121 2 Corinthians 6:1-10, 7:2-5 Hebrews 11:1-3, 23-27, 32-40

Today's subject is suggested by a story in one of Sue Monk Kidd's books.

Well known for *The Secret Life of Bees*—and for being a Guideposts Magazine Contributing Editor—*When the Heart Waits* contains Kidd's account of an incident from her childhood.

At her grandmother's house, she and her brothers—with the aid of a family friend named Sweet—discovered a wheelbarrow which, after many rains, was filled with water and, magically—tadpoles!

The children happily raced inside to find jars to capture some of the little swimmers, but just then her grandmother appeared at the door and told her,

“Sue, you are supposed to be practicing the piano now. And girls aren't supposed to play with tadpoles.”

(Note: This may have been the first incident—not being allowed to play with tadpoles— which launched Sue Monk Kidd to becoming a feminist)

Sue put her jar down, dragged herself to the piano bench and began practicing.

The next day, Sweet, the family friend was taking care of Sue and they headed off on one of their usual walks to the city park about four blocks from their house.

Sue was anxious to get there and began to run, but the Sweet grabbed her hand and began taking her in the opposite direction.

“We're taking the long way around.” Sweet said.

“The long way?” Sue cried. “Why are we taking the long way?”

Sue made a scene.

But Sweet didn't relent, and off they went on the long way, 8 blocks instead of 4.

As they turned a corner and saw the park two blocks away, Sweet pulled a jar from her coat pocket and gave it to Sue.

Just ahead was a ditch swollen with water...and tadpoles.

“Now aren't you glad we took the long way round?” Sweet said. There aren't any tadpoles the short way.”

“Soon”, the adult Sue Monk Kidd writes, “I was elbow deep in the brown water, chasing after the rich darting life before me. I was reveling in a new universe and it was one of the grandest moments of my girlhood!”

Years later, Sue Monk Kidd came across a poem by Henry David Thoreau, entitled “*Among the Worst of Men That Ever Lived*”.

Thoreau's poem was about slavery, and slaves' struggles to free themselves from “the worst of men that ever lived”.

The poem ends with a line spoken by the slaves on their hard won freedom, “And we went on to heaven the long way around”.

The long way around!

We get to the Kingdom of Heaven the long way round.

The most valuable experiences in life come by taking the long way round.

It is a highly suggestive thought in our current predicament.

The quick way to do things in our culture is through force and violence. It is a learned, cultural habit.

This has to stop.

No wonder we are so divided and at each other's throats.

We have this horrible habit of solving our problems by force and violence.

Dr King said the moral arm of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

Believing that is one thing. Trusting in it is quite another.

The letter to the Hebrews makes the bold claim that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen—that new worlds are being prepared by the word of God!....from things that are not visible.

We have to start believing even if we have a hard time trusting it.

You know how you come to trust things that you aren't really sure you believe, don't you?

You try them out.

One step at a time, you try it out.

You take the first step.
See how you feel.
See where you are now.

Then you take the second step.

Most of the time in life, we have to walk our way into faith.

Giving of ourselves is like that, whether it is a cause, a proposition, an idea, a project, even another person.

Jesus had a saying, “*Where your heart is, there will your treasure be.*”

He was talking about giving to the work of God.

In other words, when you start giving —little by little—your hard earned & saved money—to something—you gradually become more & more committed to it, whether it’s a cause, people you love, a church, a service, a ministry.

This Jesus idea holds true in your giving to God as you understand God to be working in and around you.

Where your treasure is, there your heart is also.

Likewise, when you start just taking those faith steps, one at a time, into some impossible beauty

— an unreachable joy!

—a seeming unattainable victory!

—you gradually become more committed **to your walk and to the destination** toward which you are walking, regardless of how hard the walk is—or how far out of sight your goal seems to be.

You begin to think “Hmmmhhh....Maybe the hidden, undertowing logic of the God process—like sap running through a tree—is preparing a new world for me—for us!—from things not presently visible.

Right now, in the problems that we face as a nation, as communities, as families, in our own individual struggles—we are going to have to stop taking the easy way of force and violence and start taking the hard way of organizing, educating, communicating, and committing to do it without violence or threat of violence

That doesn't mean we shouldn't get angry about inequalities and injustices and miseries which we and people we know experience.

No! Anger like that, rooted in fear of dehumanizing non-existence, is absolutely necessary if new creative conditions of living are to be made.

It just means we can't threaten people with violence or act with violence.

Instead, give to others the truth as you have experienced it yourself and as you have learned it from others.

And don't try to survive and endure all by yourself with your fears.

Share your fears with others!

Begin to learn about the basis of your fears.

Organize people to overcome them.

And insist that the people who are experiencing the problems should have the power to decide how to solve them.

All of us are going to have to become more assertive about exercising our power to solve the problems which we and our loved ones and friends and our companions and co-workers in life are experiencing.

Feeling helpless, powerless and despairing is not acceptable.

This week, while living under the tension of the election, I have been reading Howard Thurman's book "The Search for Common Ground". He wrote the book amidst the intense divisions in America during the time of the Vietnam War, the Black Freedom Movement, urban rebellions, catastrophic assassinations, Watergate and the beginnings of the Women's Liberation Movement.

"There is a spirit in humans and in the world working always against the thing that destroys and lays waste." He wrote. "Always we must know that the

contradictions of life are not final or ultimate; we must distinguish between failure and a many-sided awareness so we will not mistake conformity for harmony, uniformity for synthesis. We will know that for all people to be alike is the death of life in humanity, and yet perceive the harmony that transcends all diversities and in which diversity finds its richness and significance.”

If we were to search far and wide for the harmony that transcends all diversities—and look deep and long for the heroes and heroines who are embodying that harmony which transcends all diversities—who would we find? And where would we find them?

People from all political spectrums counting ballots day and night?

A man taking a homeless man to the polls even though he thinks this homeless man isn't voting the way he is?

A young woman born in the United States, voting “for all my family members who cannot vote”.

The people who are asking questions!

What if we all decided to start asking more questions of each other?

Wouldn't that begin to make a difference?

Recently, a journalist asked a young man if he thought people are born gay or if being gay is a choice. When the young man answered that he believed it was a choice, the interviewer then asked, “When do you choose to become straight?” to which the man then seemed to consider opening up to another viewpoint.

The architect who designed our church building was talking to a group here about climate change. Someone raised the question of whether or not it could be proved that it is caused by human activity. Erik Heitman replied, “I believe it is. But even if it isn't, shouldn't we act to do something about it?”

What if we all started asking questions?

What if White people started asking African Americans what does Black Lives Matter mean to you?

What if we started asking small business owners “What do you need to survive and flourish?”

What if we started asking displaced workers and struggling farmers, “What do you need to get back to the future in a much better place?”

And then again, my question from earlier in this message: Shouldn't people who are experiencing the problems have the power to decide how to solve them?

All of us, from every spectrum, could benefit by asking ourselves and each other how that might happen and what it would look like.

I want to move toward a conclusion with a final question, one I asked a few months ago right here.

Who are you working for?

Day in and day out!—whether you are actually working a paying job or not?

Whether you are a student or retired or working full-time or part-time? Or two or three part times.

Who are you working for?

This is the crucial question.

And the answer, I hope, is “More than a paycheck.”

More than a paycheck!

I ask this question all the time.

Because working for a paycheck—as everyone knows— is hard work.

Add in Covid, lockdowns, an uncertain economy, layoffs, unemployment, doing more with fewer people....working for a paycheck is that much harder.

So who do you work for?

Me?

I work for:

All the people in my family I love—my children, grandchildren, my wife.

I work for people outside my family who have become my family and whom I love.

I work for artists.

I work for my union boss—Jesus the carpenter.

I work for the church.

I work for God.

Who are you working for?

Keep working!

The word of God—God’s hidden logic—like sap running up a tree from the roots to the limbs and the leaves—is preparing new worlds from things that are now invisible.

Tadpoles!—and the the Kingdom of Heaven Are Found By Taking the Long Way Around.

Either explicitly or without saying it, the majority of white people think Black lives don't matter.

A significant number of white people are proud to be racists.

The American story line—running from enslavement and disenfranchisement of millions of African slaves—through the Jim Crow segregation and disenfranchisement of freed African American slaves—to today's obvious attempts to gerrymander African American voters and deprive at least a million African Americans of the right to vote because they were convicted of a crime—is a cruel, consistent story line.

But underneath that story line is also an undertow which sweeps toward a different outcome and destination.

Two gay black men were elected to Congress last Tuesday.

For the first time, a black woman became a Congresswoman in the State of Missouri.

In Oklahoma, community organizer Mauree Turner won the race in House District 88 and will break barriers in Oklahoma's statehouse as the first Muslim in the Oklahoma Legislature and the first nonbinary legislator in America.

In places like Georgia and Arizona, among Black and Brown people, long-term organizing works because when people who are afraid start communicating with each other and building relationships, positive energy is created.

The Kingdom of Heaven is reached the long way around.

We want to take the short way to just about anything, don't we?

Quickaholics! Many of us are quickaholics! God forbid that we should take the long way round anywhere, anytime—much less the long way round to heaven.

Let us have our microwaves, thank you.

Let us have our speed dial telephones.

Pump and go gasoline at the—Quick Trip!

And all the fast food you could ever imagine!

We want it done now! Multi-task or die!

Multi-think even if you do have only one brain!

Time is money—in the universe of the Quickaholics!

The best way to get rich is to—Get Rich Quick! Try mortgage fraud if you can't think of a quicker way. Inflate the price of your house. Sell it to a buyer who never intends to pay a dime, but who takes the bank's inflated loan and, presto!—spreads the wealth around! Who'd a thunk it!

A quickaholic, that's who! The master of the shortcut!

I noticed, as I was looking for Thoreau's poems, that he died at the age of 45. Tuberculosis took away his breath. Yet still he wrote, "Nothing can more useful to a person than a determination not be hurried." He wrote that at the age of 25.

"A determination not to be hurried"....."and we went to heaven the long way round".

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If there were no other purpose to the religious and spiritual life than to show us the long way round in daily living, it would be worth it to try out the religious and spiritual life.

By the way, the phrase "religious life" is my shorthand for "spiritual life practiced in a group" (like a church!), and "spiritual life" is your own, individual spiritual life.

Either or both—it's the long way round in our quickaholic world.

I've been reading Abraham Heschel's classic work *The Sabbath*. In it, he writes a sentence that could be good "Words of Preparation" for some Sunday worship service:

"The Sabbath comes like a caress, wiping away fear, sorrow and somber memories." A good frame of mind to adopt for the beginning of worship, I would venture.

Later he writes, "We need the Sabbath in order to survive civilization!"

"Gallantly, ceaselessly, quietly, men and women must fight for inner liberty to remain independent of the enslavement of the material world.

Inner liberty depends on being exempt from domination of things as well as from domination of people."

And there is no shortcut to that kind of meaningful Sabbath because it means cultivating the interior life. And cultivating the interior life is a long, arduous route that involves:

- Striving after prayer
- Striving for self discipline
- A certain amount of reading
- A certain measure of meditation
- An emphasis on virtue—being and doing good
- And finally, a certain amount of waiting for the hidden action of

God within us

The whole goal—of the spiritual life and the religious life—is really for us to become awake to the lively presence and activity of God. And to become that awake, individually and as a community/congregation—we must awaken to our own souls.

Put another way, to become awake to That Which is Greater than the Sum of

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All Beauty and All Joy and All Love and All Goodness and All Mercy and Justice—which is alive and at large in the universe—Which—Who—is God—we must become awake to the Beauty of Life that is within us...and the Joy of Life that is within us and the Love of Life and the Goodness that is within us—all of which is our soul.

This process or path to God and to our inward sanctuary or soul requires cultivating the interior life.

This awakening requires Sabbath.

This kind of salvation requires a determination not to be hurried.

This Heaven can be reached only by taking the long way round.

It's the way you find tadpoles.

And, if you are Magi, that is, wise men who studied stars somewhere to the east of Bethlehem and Israel, it is also the way you find your way to the Christ child.

In the end, what is important about the story of the Wise Men is its significance and its meaning to you and what kind of spiritual response it produces in individual Christians and in Christian congregations. How it happened, whether it really happened in this way or that way, what happened afterwards, is not really the point.

It's a vision!

It's a beautiful and true vision for today—of how wise men and wise women can, by taking the long way round—following a star—finding inner liberty from the Herods of this world and this life—groping for another way when one way doesn't work—find the Christ child, which, when you really get right down to it, means experiencing the birth of Christ within ourselves and becoming, not better people, but new people