

Last week in Chat Room, the subject of motivational posters came up.

I can't remember how the topic came up, but it was an interesting discussion. There's a certain kind of motivational poster you've probably all seen. It'll show a pretty scene, then one word, followed by a definition. They're made by a company called Successories. **This past year, instead of getting a raise, a friend of mine was given a Successories motivational poster to hang in his office.** It shows a bridge crossing a stream, has the word *Collaborate* in big letters, followed by the saying, "Meeting people halfway is the most significant trip we can take. We don't work *for* each other; we work *with* each other." **My friend hates that poster.** He asked his boss, "Since I don't work for you, but with you, how come you got a raise and I didn't?"

Now there's a website called Despair.com, where you can go to buy what they call demotivational posters. **They look just like the motivational posters, but are a bit more cynical.** I was looking at it this week. One poster showed a V-formation of geese flying into a sunset with the words *Dare to Slack!* written in big letters. Then the saying read, "When birds fly in the right formation, they need only exert half the effort. Even in nature, teamwork results in collective laziness."

Another poster showed the running of the bulls in Pamplona, Spain. **As you know, that is a long-standing tradition in that city.** They've been doing it since 1924. Fifteen people have been killed and hundreds more horribly maimed. But it's a tradition. **So one of the demotivational posters showed a picture of a terrified man running down a street with a huge bull running right behind him, ready to gore him.** And in big letters, it says *Tradition*, then the saying reads, "Just because you've always done it that way, doesn't mean it's not incredibly stupid."

I thought of that poster this week when I was reading our Gospel passage about John the Baptist. **His father, Zechariah, when told by the angel Gabriel his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a child, made a wisecrack about her being too old to get pregnant, and was struck mute by Gabriel, who didn't appreciate Zechariah's attitude.** It was a bit awkward. Zechariah was a priest and couldn't deliver sermons. He tried using sign language, but it didn't work, so he went home, and spent time with his wife, who became pregnant shortly afterwards. Nine months later, she gave birth to John, whose job would be getting people used to the idea of Jesus. **This was in keeping with the pattern of prophetic ministry.** Whenever God raised up a prophet, God also called someone to pave their way, someone to go out before them and say, "Listen up, there's a new message coming. Pay attention."

It came time for John's circumcision and naming, so family and friends gathered for the event, as was the custom. All the family were there—aunts, uncles, cousins, plus a lot of other people. **It was unheard of for someone so old to have a child, so it drew a crowd.** Poor Zechariah, he still can't talk. So the crowd asks Elizabeth, "What will you name your child?" It was the custom to name the first born son for the father to carry on the name. **But the angel had said, "Name him John."** So Elizabeth said, "We'll call him John."

The crowd was scandalized. "John? There's no one in our family named John. That isn't how it's done. That isn't our tradition." They looked to Zechariah. "Are you going to let her get away with this? Speak up?" **Well, he couldn't speak, but he could write.** So he wrote on a tablet, "His name is John!" And as soon as he dotted the exclamation point, his voice returned, and he began praising God. **Then the infant John was circumcised, and that was apparently so traumatic John didn't speak for a year.**

John grew up, came of age, and began traveling about, telling people to get ready for Jesus. There began to gather around John a group of followers, attracted by his power and charisma. I don't know that John encouraged that, but it happened, as these things sometimes do. So John, like Jesus, soon had his disciples too.

In the 19th chapter of Acts, when the Apostle Paul visited Asia Minor for the first time, he found an entire group of John's followers, years after John's death. **Paul promptly re-baptized them in the name of Jesus.** So we know there were some tensions between the two camps, that both John and Jesus were magnetic personalities, able to attract people to them. **As I said, I'm not sure John encouraged this, though at one point, when Jesus wasn't moving as quickly and decisively as John had hoped, he sent a messenger to Jesus asking, "Are you the one whom God hath sent, or should I look for another?" (Luke 7:19)**

It's hard to do a new thing, isn't it? Even the people who should be most enthusiastic, the people God chose to help bring it about, can waiver and have their doubts. **"Are you the one God sent? This isn't unfolding like I thought it should. Are you the one? Are you sure about this?"** And tradition has its own sort of magnetic pull—the safety and comfort of doing something the way we've always done it before.

So families relate the same old ways, rear their children the same old ways, people work at their jobs the same old way, treat their friends the same old way, think the same old way, live the same old way, talk the same old way, treat people the same old way. Even when those ways are no longer helpful, because tradition has its own magnetic pull.

This is especially true in church, because we've been told God gave us the traditions. We forget we invented them, not God. Now some of our religious traditions are wonderful. **They can be comforting, they provide reassurance in difficult times, they help us remember what's important.** But religious traditions can also be the most pernicious, because they have a way of hanging on long after their usefulness has passed. The bull is right behind us, ready to gore us, but it's a tradition, so we'll keep doing it. **We say creeds we no longer believe, perpetuate biases long since rejected, perform rites which have lost their meaning, conduct business in a way that practically guarantees nothing gets done, because writing a new creed, giving up an old prejudice, creating a new ritual, or discovering a new way of working together can be difficult and frightening, and it has been forced into us that God likes the old ways best.**

So there are Elizabeth and Zechariah. Zechariah is a priest. **He knows all about tradition.** "What will you call your son?" he is asked. "You'll follow the custom, won't you?" Elizabeth and Zechariah say, "We know the tradition, but we're naming him John." What is the next verse? "And fear came upon all the neighbors." (Luke 1:65) **What is your response when God wants to start something new in your life?** Fear? Amazement? Gratitude? Hope? Excitement? Panic?

I was talking with a minister friend this past week and he said some people at his church are upset. They were a dying church three years ago, down to 30 or so folks, so they began praying God would send people and new people began showing up and now some of the people who prayed for them to show up are upset because the church has changed. **"They're changing us," one of the ladies complained to my friend.** My friend told her, "Thank God, we needed to change."

You know, I don't get that. I come to church on Sunday hoping you all will change me. **I hope you change how I treat my family, how I conduct my business, how I treat my neighbors, how I understand God, how I speak about people, what I think about people.**

Last Sunday, Joan and I went to visit Dick and Pauline and saw their children and grandchildren care for them and saw Dick and Pauline so deeply grateful, sitting in their chairs so happy their family was there. Pauline was sitting in her wheelchair, so I knelt down and held her hand and she smiled at me like an angel. **How could that not change me?** How could that not give me a new understanding of the Christian fellowship? I want you to change me. In a way, you're a little like John. You remind me to pay attention and listen close, that God is about to do something new. **That's what John did.**

That's what we're to do—remind the world to pay attention, because God speaks in a small voice.

It's kind of ironic when you think about it. **The Church has always said God is most present when we do things the same old way, when our life together is the same old thing, week after week, year after year.** So we say the same old words, pray the same old prayers, look for God in the same old rituals, worship God in the same old places.

But John came along and said God was doing a new thing. And Jesus came behind him and said, "The Spirit blows where it will."

Traditions. Sometimes they help us see God. But just as often, they can blind us to God.

Lord, grant us the wisdom to know which traditions give life and which traditions don't, the grace to value people over practice, and the faith to know you guide our future as you did our past. Amen.