

From Spectators to Participants

Matthew 9:35-10:8

June 18, 2017

In the lead up to today, I've spent a great deal of time thinking about my Father. Now this is not a rare occurrence as I think about him a lot. Father's Day though has become increasingly difficult for me over the years as I have watched my Dad's illnesses reduced him to a shell of the man I call my Dad.

So just like last year at this time, and the year before that, and so on and so forth, this past week I reflected on our relationship and what it has meant for me to be the son of Tommy Knight. As I reflected, many memories and teachings came to my mind, but it seemed this week one topic dominated the others: my Dad loved to picture his only son as a hard worker. The arena never seemed to matter as much as my effort. From the athletic fields and gyms to the floor of the service department at Black Cadillac in Greensboro, my Dad wanted to know that his son wasn't sitting around watching like a spectator.

Then I thought about the summer when I was 14 when for some reason, my Dad believed I needed to get a job... an idea I was not very keen on... yet there I was being woken up at 6:00 AM so that I could catch a ride to this factory in Burlington. My first day on the job was terrible. I was the youngest worker and my co-workers made my life pretty tough. When I returned home I told my Dad that I would not be going back the next day to which he replied, yes you will. And sure enough that next morning here he comes into my bedroom waking me up and sure enough I went back to work. That pretty much sums up that summer.

Then there was the time I came home from practice to find all of our groceries on the table in our kitchen with Dad sitting at the table. I asked him what was going on and he said, "Boy, I got you a job bagging groceries... Now I am your customer and these are my groceries and here are the bags. I want you to bag my groceries for me." Telling this story today can sound a little funny, but I can assure you he was not joking. So I proceeded to bag my first customer's groceries, even though I was in my home with my Dad. Each time I "messed up" he lovingly corrected me. You see, he knew I didn't know how to bag groceries and he wanted to make sure I had a solid foundation before I ever showed up for my first day of work. It was important to him, and in turn has become important to me.

A few years back I learned that my Dad came by every job I had as a teenager, without me knowing, and met with my boss to talk about me. My Dad was only interested in knowing one thing though... is my Boy working hard for you or is he just standing around watching. Luckily each of my bosses responded by letting him know that I was a very hard worker and each time I was asked to do something I did it to the best of my ability. Today, I have this sense that hearing that from my bosses was gratifying to my Dad. He didn't want me to stand around watching. He didn't want me to be a spectator, especially not when there was work that needed to be done.

I know this has shaped and form the person I am today. Working hard, giving all that I have to give, is very important to me and it is something I want pass on to my own children. In every aspect of their lives, I want them to participate to the fullest extent possible. I want them to give their best effort and I want them to work when there is work to be done.

There is something though that I want them to avoid because it is not a healthy nor is it a joyful way of living, and you want to know something, I know this firsthand... I want them to avoid over-working. I don't want them to place such a high importance on working hard that they miss out on other things life has to offer. I want them to find a community of people who are willing to share the workload because sharing the work within the community is critical. I want them to belong to a community of people committed to participating, not just spectating. I want them to belong to a community committed to sharing the workload because then I will know they have found a community committed to each other.

You want to know something else... I want this for us too. All of us deserve a community where the participants outnumber the spectators. This is especially so because today's harvest is plentiful, just like yesterday's harvest. While some spectators may be necessary, if a community wants to thrive, wants to reach its potential, it needs more participants than spectators, and not the other way around.

Jesus, I believe, recognized this and knew change was needed. I believe he knew this new kingdom movement would struggle if 1% of the people continued to do 99% of the work. So he set about to change things and he started with his Disciples. Up to that point in their journey together, Jesus participated and his Disciples spectated and while those roles are rooted in the Rabbinic teaching tradition, we will also find within that tradition, a point where the spectator becomes the participant. They had watched Jesus cure the sick, raise the dead,

cleanse the lepers and cast out demons, but now they were going to participate in this mission.

This is our tradition too, yet most of the time the masses seem more comfortable spectating. We think of the church as a refuge, a place of comfort and hope, and a place where we revel in our good fortune and celebrate God's love and forgiveness. And as good as all that may be, when it happens, we are reduced to nothing more than consumers of God's love...content to be spectators just following the action. The thing is spectating is not the life for which we were created or the life to which God is calling us.

The life modeled for us in Jesus moves us from spectators to participants, even and especially when the movement stretches us... gets us out of our self-created comfort zone. Jesus had been out there preaching, healing and helping, as only he could do. The Bible says he had compassion on the people 'because they were harassed and helpless'. He seemed to think there were a bunch of folk like that. He said the harvest was plentiful. But the laborers were few.

So when he recognized this Jesus stopped, called the Twelve together, gave them an awesome task, blessed them and sent them out to find what he called the 'lost sheep'. And get this. He told them not to worry if they had enough money or training or anything else! Just go! Just show up.

It was as if he was saying: 'There are a bunch of people out there who need to hear a word of good news. Many of them are hurting and live without hope. Their lives are lost. Some of them will hear you and find hope. Others won't, but that is not your problem. Don't try to anticipate all the obstacles you may encounter. Just tell them the good news and live by faith.'

Maybe if it was up to them they would have remained his assistants, helping out, following along. They would have remained comfortable spectators, but Jesus would have none of that. Jesus did not ask them to help. He told them to do the very same things he had been called to do. He realized he could not do it all by himself. And he sent them with no further training and precious little advice. For Jesus, it would never be enough to take care of the sheep already in the fold. So, he sent his disciples into the uncomfortable places of life...where the thickets and briars rule...to find those who are lost and to share with them a word of hope.

That is how Jesus lived. So far as we know, he never gave public opinion a second thought. He never worried about how to pay for something. He offered no

program, save the gospel. And virtually all the training was accomplished ‘on the job’. It was not like you had to take a class, learn the Bible or answer all the questions ahead of time. It was almost a call to improvise, once you figured out what the need was. It was a call to action. There are sheep not in the fold. That means there is work to be done.

This should not come as a surprise to us. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Preaching the kingdom without doing anything about it is just politics, and good works without good news is no more than a temporary reprieve, but to proclaim the kingdom while acting it out—that is powerful, and that is what Jesus sent his friends out to do.” (SW-201, p.153)

And he sent them with nothing...no money, no shoes, no bag...just power and belief. God’s sufficient power and Jesus’ belief in them. They relied, not on the overflow of their abundance to do ministry, not on their own resourcefulness, but on God’s power and Jesus’ belief that they could do it.

I believe it is time we collectively begin praying about the areas of harvest in the life of this church. What areas of ministry are ready for harvest and then who among you will step-up and participate in the work? These are serious questions which can lead to a revitalization if we respond.

There are numerous ministries we could do if we choose wisely, but no matter what we none of us can do the work of harvesting alone. Once we figure out what is needed, then we can put out a call to action. I want each of you to think hard about your passions. Is there some ministry rooted in helping and healing and building community that pulls at you? If there is lets talk about it and lets figure out a way to empower and help answer this call to action. There is work to be done and lets stop spectating and start participating.

There are days, sometimes weeks when I am dog tired. During those days and weeks the sabbath cannot come soon enough. The work needing to be done during those days and weeks was plentiful, especially when I was doing that work alone. While at times the volume of work frustrated me, there was always something deep in my bones calling me to work when there was work to be done. It is still calling me today and its pull feel ever stronger. Maybe it comes from being Tommy Frank Knight’s son. Maybe its who I was created to be. Maybe it’s a bit of both. Even though Dad can’t really talk with me anymore, I like to think he is proud of the way I work when there is work to be done. It was important to him that he

raise me that way and I believe his lessons stuck with me. Sitting idle and hoping that others pick up the slack just doesn't sit well with the person I know I am.

There are times when spectating has its advantages. Being a spectator places certain limitations on us though... and while we might feel comfortable in that spectator role, we have been called to be participants in this life. Not all of the time, but some of the time we need to participate because I believe we honor God each and every time we stretch ourselves by participating in the ministries of helping and healing and building up our community as a whole.

Participants... that is who we were called to be because the harvest is plentiful. Let us move from spectators to participants for there is work to be done.

AMEN!