

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 17

Year A

Pivoting

[RCL] Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45cl; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Prudence Crandall may sound like the name of a character in a Jane Austen novel, but she was a real-life force of nature in 19th century New England. Crandall started a boarding school for girls in Canterbury, Connecticut, impassioned to raise educated women. One day, she received an application from a young African American girl named Sarah Harris. Crandall admitted Harris, creating the first integrated classroom in the United States.

As Crandall accepted more and more students of color into her school, more and more white parents pulled their children out. Local merchants refused to do business with the African American students, and the townspeople ostracized them and plotted to pass laws that made their education difficult or impossible. Vandals even set the school on fire, which prompted Crandall to close, for fears that the children's lives would be in danger. We remember Crandall in early September as one through whom God worked for the sake of bringing forth justice in our world.

We look on these moments in history with a sense of clarity—we believe that Crandall was inspired by God in her resolute will to teach girls of every color and race, and we believe that, if we were to find ourselves in her position, we would do the same thing. The problem with this line of thinking is that it often takes Crandall's agency out of the mix and assumes that the path she took was the obvious one, that she had no internal conflict about what educating her girls might cost, and that perhaps a famous composer provided her a triumphant soundtrack to reassure her along the way. Most of us have discovered by now that life does not play out like a Hollywood film.

God does not often appear to us in burning bushes as She did with Moses—although Jesus comes close every now and then on [pieces of toast](#), [potato chips](#), and in [cups of coffee](#).

When God appears to Moses, Moses has had quite a life. Born to a Hebrew woman, he was left in a river for his own protection, and the Pharaoh's daughter found him and eventually took him as her son. As he grew, he became increasingly disturbed by the way the Egyptians treated the Hebrews. One day, he saw an Egyptian beating one of the Hebrews; Moses intervened and killed the Egyptian. For fear that he would be punished for what he had done on behalf of a Hebrew, he fled and found a new tribe, a new family.

One day Moses is going about his business, keeping his father-in-law's flock of sheep, and the angel of the Lord appears to Moses in a flaming bush. Moses leaves the path he is walking to explore the phenomenon, and he finds himself on holy ground. He encounters God in this place off the path, and God reminds him of the people he left behind. "I have observed their misery," God says. "I have heard their cry...indeed, I know their sufferings...and I have come to deliver them from the Egyptians."

Until this moment, and for a while after this moment, Moses was not a radical. When he killed the Egyptian slave master, it was not a well-calculated, pre-meditated, politically-motivated demonstration. He was not protesting the pharaoh, as far as we know. Yet something stirred within Moses, even while his life was about blending in and surviving; the stirring within him led him to deviate from his path to go where God seemed to be calling him. God met Moses in the midst of his internal conflict and called him to follow a different pathway.

The disciples had a similar encounter with God in Jesus. At some point in their years together, Jesus starts to reveal that he expects to undergo some significant suffering at the hands of the powers that be. He shares that he expects to be killed. His disciples probably react in some of the ways you might expect, but it is Peter who pulls Jesus to the side and rejects these grim predictions. Immediately Jesus rejects Peter's resistance to reality. "Get *behind* me, Satan!"

"Join the path on which I am walking," Jesus seems to say. "Lose the preoccupation with the way you wanted or expected things to be, and get on board with reality!" Sometimes we need to hear the same message, and often it needs to feel like a slap across the face to be effective.

During the opening Eucharist of the 2017 Episcopal Youth Event (EYE) Presiding Bishop Michael Curry preached a barn-burner. During the sermon, Bishop Curry bounced around the stage in his typical fashion, splashed water from the font all over a crowd of exuberant teenagers, and repeated a phrase that will forever be engraved on the minds of all 1,500 people in attendance: "If you want to change the world, follow Jesus."

Indeed, following Jesus has, does, and will continue to lead us on a path of personal and communal transformation. It is not, however, *we* who change the world, but rather God in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, who changes us.

God sneaks into our inner life and pivots our consciousness. God calls us out of our routines to notice the plight that weighs heavy on God's heart, and the more we follow Jesus, the more we read the gospels, and the more we pray and meditate on Jesus' life, the more we will encounter those in need. Not only that, the more we seek God, the more God will lead us to face our enemies, face our fears, and face the challenge of risking everything for Jesus' sake.

This is what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus. To follow Jesus is to go to the place we would not normally go, to follow a path that leads to the outsider, and to seek an encounter with the Living God. When we follow that path, we often find ourselves in intimidating circumstances, but God is with us, and where we find ourselves is on holy ground.

The Reverend Curtis Farr is the Associate Rector of St. James's Episcopal Church in West Hartford, Connecticut. Match strikes flint for Curtis in the pulpit, where he approaches Scripture playfully, seeking to inspire greater participation in God's mission of reconciliation. Curtis is from the Pacific Northwest and loves hiking in the woods or kayaking on a secluded river. He can often be found impersonating Neil Diamond at your local karaoke bar.

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