

Have you ever felt as though you didn't fit in? Perhaps it was because you didn't agree with the majority opinion or you felt that what most of the crowd was doing was wrong. To what extent do you think you are a non-conformist? When you have spoken up on behalf of a worthy cause or someone in need, have you identified yourself as a Christian?

Up to this point in our exploration of the Dark Wood, we've been considering the quest for our life's path primarily from the perspective of our journey as individuals. Each of us must find our distinctive path through it, but given the difficulties and challenge we encounter, it is a good thing to walk with an experienced companion or a few wise friends who can provide guidance and encouragement. It is often others who point out the trails that lead to dead ends or over cliffs or in a direction that isn't right for us. Such companions often help us receive our clearest glimpses of the gifts God is revealing.

When Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, he is not alone but surrounded by his disciples and followers. On a donkey, he visibly embodies humility, meekness and serving others. Yes, the crowd honors and celebrates him: *Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!* But this is principally a ragtag band of followers, admirers, and curiosity seekers, ordinary folk, some of whom walk by Jesus' side, while others place their cloaks on the ground before him. This parade is the complete opposite of a Roman procession—with powerful officials in full regalia, riding on magnificent horses, with symbolic golden eagles and polished swords, while the crowd gawks from a safe distance.

On that day, as the crowd *praised God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen*, these precious moments of hope and unity are rudely interrupted by Pharisees. *Teacher, order your disciples to stop! Why? Are they afraid that the Romans will hear the cheering and violently end the parade? Are they outraged by the crowd calling Jesus king, meaning Anointed One and Messiah, and shouting Hosanna—save us? Blasphemy, especially so soon after Jesus' arrogant clearing of the tables in God's temple!*

And then come Jesus' astounding, forceful reply: *I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out!*

You cannot stop God, you cannot stop the Spirit from rushing into human hearts, minds and bodies and then erupting out of their mouths with shouts of *Hosanna!* God doesn't follow rules and regulations, no, God bursts out in unexpected places and disruptive ways. And if you silence me and any of my followers, God will upset the natural order of things so that the truth will be heard! The truth of people yearning to be saved from oppression—political, economic and religious; the truth of people longing for the freedom to be who God calls them to be, coming together in peace, witnessing signs of God's gracious and healing love, joyfully praising God as a band of misfits that might one day become a faith community of misfits.

Misfits? Now, you may not like the word or concept of misfit being used to describe Jesus and his followers. But another gift of the Dark Wood may just be the gift of misfits--non-conformists

or rebels, people who don't fit comfortably into the prevailing environment, who challenge or protest in some way the way things are in the world. Jesus and his followers don't fit in with many of the Jewish religious leaders and scholars, and certainly not with the Temple traders. He didn't fit in either with those who wanted to use weapons to revolt against the Romans.

So, are we too called to be misfits, as individuals and as a Christian community?

In his book, *Gifts of the Dark Wood*, Rev. Eric Elnes describes a misfit from a different but complimentary angle, as someone who is intentional about embracing the gifts of the Dark Wood and finding his or her true calling in this world. Jesus discovered, perhaps at his baptism, who he was, and what God was calling him to do, to proclaim and embody the kingdom or kin-dom of God, here right now and not yet realized. In his passion for God's mission, Jesus faced the danger and pain of entering Jerusalem and confronting the powers-that-be, for the liberation of all people. This small Palm Sunday parade was the first step for this band of misfits, who must have felt apprehensive as well as hopeful.

It takes great courage and perseverance to go against the flow and challenge the status quo. It is extremely difficult to embrace times of uncertainty and emptiness as gifts that will open us up to God's Spirit and the fullness of life. That's why we need wise misfit companions who will walk with us.

So many subtle and not-so-subtle voices surround us telling us what is good for us, what will make us happy, what we should desire. Not to mention encouraging us to cover things up and shift the blame when things go wrong. Outside pressures and expectations abound, along with the ones we impose on ourselves. Many of these voices offer quick fixes and superficial solutions, instead of encouraging us to go deeper in the Dark Wood, to take the time to understand how we really feel and what is the right thing for us to do. Going into the heart of any pain or struggle can be frightening, for we often encounter unresolved issues buried within us from the past.

As if that weren't enough, all sorts of unexpected things happen that interrupt or disrupt our lives. We can be overwhelmed by forces that end up stifling our natural energy and deepest dreams. And at times we begin to drift away from what we truly love or care about.

Yes, it's probably safe to describe as non-conformists or misfits people who discover the value of gifts like temptation and getting lost as readily as they celebrate triumphs and achievements. In the midst of a society that often urges us to avoid, deny or escape difficult struggles, misfits try instead to face them. Why? Because misfits not only yearn to live authentic lives, but they also trust in the presence and movement of God's Spirit within them and around them.

In what ways are you a misfit? Do you see some misfits in the pews around you?

When Jesus is brought before the assembly of the elders, chief priests and scribes, the disconnect between this misfit and those in power is striking—and tragic. In his style as spiritual teacher, Jesus doesn't answer their questions directly. First he challenges them to listen to Scripture anew, and hear the voice of God speaking to them. He quotes words from the ancient prophet

Daniel: *from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God. To whom belongs the power? See the new thing that God is doing right in front of you!*

But they only repeat themselves: *Are you then the Son of God?* And Jesus responds: **You say that I am.** Listen to yourselves! Examine your image of the Son of God. Look at what is hidden beneath your question! But no, these men have no interest in facing their own fear or closed hearts with this rabble-rouser misfit. They are blinded by one agenda: to get rid of him.

And so they lie to themselves and everyone else, condemning him as a rebel: *What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!*

Perhaps a misfit is also someone who won't be drawn into a power play when it comes to God and faith, who won't play the game of pretense or subterfuge that others may want us to play. It is good to have at least a few misfit companions who challenge us to take an honest look at our motives, why we are doing something wrong or unkind, what fear or hurt is driving our words and actions. Some of you here know what it's like to face your struggles head-on, some of you know what it feels like not to fit in, some of you have had experience with going against the flow, protesting, refusing to conform. Together we may just be a wonderful motley band of misfits, aspiring misfits and people of faith who welcome misfits!

I believe that an Open and Affirming, Peace with Justice, Green church such as ours is called to take on this role and responsibility more and more, to widen and deepen our reach into the community, to be visible and vocal in our efforts to cross divides and bring people together through a shared vision of peace and abundance. Not only as individuals, but as representatives of this church who engage others in conversation about beliefs and fears and dreams for our towns and our world.

Let's be a congregation that goes out into the fray with Jesus knowing that we do not go it alone but are blessed with the presence of faith-filled companions. Jesus challenges us to be a misfit community of faith that embraces his passion for the liberation and reconciliation of all people. Every precious person deserves to live wholeheartedly, fully alive and true to oneself. As we talk about our vision for this congregation, let's explore this idea of misfits, non-conformists, people of faith who seek to come fully alive and actively encourage others to find their true calling.

As we now descend deeper into the Dark Wood of Holy Week, we remember that Jesus comes into Jerusalem surrounded by those who will live the uncertainty, temptation and emptiness alongside him. And who in the midst of future struggles will carry out their mission boldly, trusting that the God revealed through Jesus Christ is always there.

#### SOURCES

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