

The Way of Jesus: A Journey Through Luke Part 12: Six in 2016

Countryside Community Church
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Scripture: Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-9

Happy New Year, Countryside! Did you see any good films over the holidays?

I know, we're supposed to be talking about *faith* here, not films. It's just that it's so much easier to talk about Star Wars or The Hunger Games, isn't it? Have you ever been at a holiday party, standing in a group of people you've never met in your life feeling awkward, and then someone asks what people think of a certain film – and suddenly everyone plunges into excited discussion? Even for an introvert like me, I can move immediately from superficial conversation about the weather into an engrossing conversation over deep life issues if someone asks me what I think of a film I've seen.

So here's a question for the transition into the New Year: Outside of your family, how many conversations did you have in 2015 about films versus faith? How many God-experiences did you talk about versus IMAX experiences? More to the point, what do you think the ratio of such discussions will be when you look back at the end of 2016?

If you're like most people, especially those of us who are not part of faith traditions with strong evangelistic tendencies, sharing your faith makes you feel uncomfortable. The thought conjures images of greasy fire-and-brimstone evangelists wearing polyester suits constantly invoking the name of "Jaayzus." We may be fans of Jesus (no matter how you pronounce his name), but we're not fans of a faith that presumes that its god casts every person who doesn't believe the way they do into hellfire. Nor do we wish to imply that our faith has somehow given us all the answers to life's really important questions, such that if a person doesn't have our same faith, we must "enlighten" them to show them the true, "true way."

Yet many of us also recognize that our faith really has made a profound difference in our life. Our faith has helped us grow in ways we could scarcely foresee; our faith has brought us unexpected comfort in our afflictions and has caused us appropriate affliction when overly comfortable. Perhaps most importantly, we have discovered that we are far from alone on our journey. Our faith joins us to a God who loves us beyond our own abilities to love ourselves, and joins us to a community of people who offer astonishing amounts of love to us (and to whom we are privileged to return such love).

So despite how ugly "evangelism" looks when we observe the street preachers and televangelists (or an in-law, colleague, or neighbor), we really *do* know that we have something good to share ... if only we had the means to share our faith without coming across the wrong way.

For many years I've been a fan of Tom Robbins, author of such books as *Jitterbug Perfume*, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, and *Fast Asleep in Frog Pajamas*. Robbins is about the quirkiest author I know. He's very funny, deeply sarcastic, wildly irreverent, and if his novels reflect his true feelings about religion, he is virulently anti-Christian despite the fact that both of his grandfathers were Baptist ministers (or maybe because of it!). This may not sound like much of a book recommendation, but I've always sensed that, underneath the surface, Robbins is a person who yearns more deeply than most people for a faith he can authentically call his own.

A few years ago, Robbins finally came out and confirmed my intuition – at least if the thoughts he put in the head of the protagonist of his novel, *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates*, indicate something of his own feelings about faith, which I believe they do. Robbins writes:

There was much to admire about a belief system that refused to proselytize or to water itself down to attract converts, that was nature friendly, body friendly ... tolerant, respectful, and innocent of any recorded act of repression or bloodshed. A belief system that didn't insist on belief? That did more good than harm? He'd award it six stars out of five and tell it to keep the change – bearing in mind all the while that a committee of dullards ... a small infusion of earnest missing links, could pull it down to their squeaky level and enfeeble it almost overnight.¹

Wow. Robbins was describing a *fictional* belief system. But you and I know that such a faith exists – in the United Church of Christ! Apparently, even someone like Tom Robbins would award us “six stars out of five” if he knew such a faith existed. But in the UCC, we're more comfortable talking about films than faith. Consequently, our theatres are packed and our churches are half-empty.

I have a hunch that many of you would, in fact, prefer to talk about faith even more than film. At least you would, provided that the conversation was real, the person you were talking with knew you weren't trying to convert them to your way of believing, and you didn't have to pretend to be someone who had found all the answers in life. Therefore the conversation would be about *faith*, not certainty. Given these preconditions, I suspect that you not only would share your faith with others, but you wouldn't mind listening to *their* thoughts on faith, too.

On this first Sunday of the New Year, I have a proposition to make: I propose that we all commit to having one such conversation about faith for every film we see in 2016 (on television or in the theatre). Family members don't count. Nor do Countryside members. I mean a conversation with someone who is not currently part of our biological or faith family.

Now, for you film buffs, this may add up to a substantial number of conversations! And for others, this may mean you never talk about your faith at all. So here's an alternative proposition if you fall into the extreme end of either category: commit to having no fewer than six conversations about faith in 2016. Again, family members and fellow Countrysiders don't count. And they should be real, honest conversations, not ten-second mentions of where you go to church. Six in 2016.

¹ Tom Robbins, *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* (Random House, 2003), p. 339.

Why six? It's not a random number. In our scriptures this morning we found Jesus sending out his 12 disciples to have real, honest conversations with others about their faith. Next thing we know, 72 have returned with them. In other words, each of the 12 had found six people who found the disciples' faith so compelling that they wanted to be disciples, too. Of course, it may have taken more than six conversations for each disciple to find six new friends of Jesus. So why not make six a *minimum* in 2016?

As long as we're following the example of Jesus and his disciples, you may want to follow their example in terms of the *kind* of faith conversations they were having.

Curiously, Jesus instructed his disciples to have the exact opposite kind of conversation we would expect from an evangelist. Jesus did **not** tell them to go out and speak about **hell**. As many of you know by now, Jesus did not conceive of hell as the evangelists do anyway. Hell was not an eternal torture chamber. Hell was *Gehenna*. *Gehenna* was a garbage dump outside the Jerusalem walls where the people cast their refuse and waste. That garbage dump served as a metaphor for Jesus. For Jesus, hell was not a place of torture in the afterlife. Hell was a place to be found in this life, or rather, a condition. Specifically, hell was *a wasted life*.

Most of us know a lot more than we let on about hell. About *wasting the life God has given us*. We waste our lives when we hate our enemies instead of loving them; when we judge others instead of seeking to understand them; when we spend more time trying to extract the speck in our neighbor's eye rather than the log in our own; when we worry more about material possessions than our walk with God. We waste our lives when we refuse to forgive someone who has repented; when we do things to others that we would never want done to us; and when we spend our lives in fear, worrying about the future when we could be seizing the blessings of the day.

In this regard, Jesus says we're also wasting our lives when spend all our time trying to avoid struggle. Jesus says we are *blessed* when we're are poor in spirit, *blessed* when we mourn, *blessed* when we are persecuted, *blessed* when we hunger and thirst for righteousness. In other words, if we consider ourselves blessed only when we're free of such struggles, then we're wasting the blessings being offered when we're in the thick of them. And who among us isn't beset regularly by some form of struggle or another? Which means we had better not wait to be struggle-free to experience God's blessings. We'd better stop *wasting* the life we've been given.

Sorry. I got a little carried away. I said that Jesus did **not** instruct his disciples to talk about hell, so we'd best leave that subject for now. What Jesus **did** instruct them to talk about was ... **heaven**. Heaven, not as a place you go in the afterlife (though Jesus believed in the afterlife). Just as hell may be found in this life, so Jesus taught that heaven may be found here, too. And this is the heart of what Jesus wanted his disciples to share with others. He wanted his disciples to tell them about heaven. *Heaven in the now*.

According to our Scripture reading from the New Revised Standard Version of Luke 10:9, Jesus instructs his disciples to tell people of how "the Kingdom of God *has drawn near to you*."

For those who do not yet have "ears to hear," or the "eyes to see," – or the heart to welcome heaven's presence – those still wasting their time in hell – the message his disciples are to deliver is that "heaven has *drawn near*." It's closer than you think! It's available to you no

matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, no matter what you have done or left undone in the past.

“God’s Kingdom. Has. Drawn. Near.” Once you finally open your eyes to behold it; once you finally open your ears to hear it’s music and your heart to welcome its embrace, you realize that heaven has been part of this world all along. Right in front of you.

When I find myself talking to others about where I find heaven in the here-and-now, I find myself talking more and more about my experiences at Countryside Community Church. With each passing year, we are becoming that place where God’s Realm may be seen, heard, touched ... and lived.

I find heaven among those of you who have discovered the secret of loving your enemies instead of hating them; those who seek to understand others rather than judge and condemn them; those who prefer to extract the logs in their own eyes rather than the specks in their neighbor’s eyes; those who focus more on their walk with God than their walk with Wall Street.

I find heaven among those of you who are more ready to forgive than hold a grudge; among you who embrace faith over fear (even as you struggle now and again with fear). I find heaven among you who are more concerned with embracing the handful of blessings that have come to you today than with worrying about the thousands of things that *could* or *might* come tomorrow.

Most of all, I find heaven’s doors wide open at Countryside when we discover the blessings that come in the heart of struggle, not merely in its absence. More and more, we discover – and display – the blessings that may be found when we are poor in spirit, when we *mourn*; when we *hunger and thirst for righteousness* that seems so rare in our world; blessings that may be found even when we are *persecuted*

When, through you, I learn to find blessings even in these most unexpected of places, I discover that blessings may be found *everywhere*. Therefore I live less constrained by my fears over what may happen to me or my family in the future, and more confident that heaven’s blessings await me – and you – no matter where the future takes us – even to death’s door. In other words, because of Countryside Community Church, I waste a lot less of my life and experience a lot more of it. And *that’s* a story worth sharing with others.