

The Parable of the Three Tenors

What does it take to hear God's voice? Does it take money and importance? Actually, the pursuit of hearing God's voice will ultimately lead to spending less and being less. How's that? The pursuit of God is more about subtraction than addition.

The Kingdom of Heaven can be likened to a concert. Let's say you want to hear your favorite vocalists. Let's call them "the three tenors." (Not original. I know.) You arrive at the concert hall with high expectations, ready to tune in to the sweet melodies you've come to love, but to your dismay, you can't. You can't make out those three voices because they are buried in a 200-voice choir of dreadfully tone-deaf lounge singers. You leave the concert hall demanding a refund because you really didn't get to hear what you wanted to hear.

Those three tenors are the voices of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The powerful, dissonant voices are the static and meaningless noise of the day to day. Do you see the issue? If we want to hear from our Holy God, at some point we must tune out the noise and tune into His voice. God's Word, silence, private worship, and time are elements that create an atmosphere that allows us to hear what God has to say.

We often fail to hear from God because we have taken our faith and made it into a busy barrage of activity. What if Jesus' schedule when He was on earth looked like yours does today. Can you imagine the Bible reading like this?

Thus Jesus hurriedly got up realizing what an important day this was going to be. He ran to Galilee and there He created 13 lesson parchments, visited 15 lepers, and had a confrontation therefore with Judas who wasn't behaving.

Hitherto, Jesus went in haste to the zealots committee where

He talked for three hours. He encountered many voice messages from the throngs of Judeans and tried to return all of them with at least a beatitude or warning.

Exhausted, the disciples verily tried to keep up with the Son of God but nay, they could not. They marveled at His time management skills and His strength in persuasive skills. People flocked to Him and stayed with Him, for they knew that if He could accomplish such tasks with great haste, effort, and fluidity then He must know what being an effective person required.

It's exhausting to read, isn't it? Jesus came to bring us rest. He lived the kind of life He wants us to pursue. He connected with the Father honestly and dynamically. We, on the other hand, are often so busy doing things for God that we miss entirely the presence of God.

Before you get so caught up in the whirlwind of life—before staring at death's finality—ask yourself if you are willing to walk daily into the quiet place where God is. Ask yourself if you are willing to mute the dissonant choir in your life and tune fully into the sound of His voice. Ask yourself if you are willing to let His words wreck you and draw you into a lifelong habit of conversation with Him.

Communion: Avoiding the Awkward and Encountering the Amazing

Growing up in the church, the Lord's Supper often seemed mechanical, cold and unfamiliar to me. Why? Because it was done in a mechanical, cold, and unfamiliar way. The subtext of many of these celebrations seemed to be, "We only do this once every three months and so we barely know how this will go. Let's not mess it up by forgetting something. So it's ironic that the theme of the Lord's Supper is actually remembering!

The Lord's Supper should be the most powerful, transforming, intimate act of worship we do together as the church. There have been times recently when these moments have been so powerful that I've saved my cup and keep it in my office days after the event. I just didn't want to forget that moment.

So how can we exile the awkwardness and set the mysterious table for worship?

First, suggestions:

- Get together to plan the Lord's Supper so that everyone knows how it will go. Don't meet days in advance. The best planning happens a few hours before worship.
- However you plan to celebrate the Lord's Supper, don't rush in the preparation. Fill the cups, get the table set? Yes. But also prepare by praying during this time. Think about the people in your church who will be there. Pray for those that come to mind. Ask God to inhabit the experience.
- During the celebration, make sure you fulfill your duties but have an attitude of blessing those you serve! How do you do this? Simply focus on each person you serve with a heart of love and compassion. Trust me. You'll have moments of improvisation where you'll see someone who doesn't get served and you'll have to backtrack or give direction to your fellow deacons, but don't allow these moments to steal *the* moment. I'll never forget Julian, a 72 year old deacon who was a soft-spoken man, well respected and loved by our church

but certainly a man of few words. I was sitting near the back of the church since I wasn't needed for serving that Sunday night. When he brought the plate to my aisle, he looked me in the eye and whispered, "Love you, Matt." That simple blessing over me transformed that night. He understood that it wasn't about the details. The Lord's Supper is always about love.

Now let's consider a few ideas for celebrating the Lord's Supper. While the fundamental elements of the Lord's Supper remain constant we can make this time elemental and unique. None of the following ideas or should be done every time the Lord's Supper is taken but, trust me, these experiential ideas had a deep impact on me as a believer and a deacon.

Exchanging of the cup

After the bread has been served and you move toward the taking of the cup, the pastor would ask the Church to stand with cup in hand and explain that the Lord's Supper is a symbol of love, reconciliation and unity. The pastor explains this to the church and then invites them to exchange their cup with another member (or more) of the church as a silent expression of their love for that person. This requires them to move around the auditorium and so you'll want to give them some time to do this. The pastor should direct them that they should do this in silence. Once as pastor, several years ago, I watched in amazement as two men, without words, reconciled simply through exchanging cups. I've often wondered if this would have happened in any other moment. The Lord's Supper broke down the wall of disagreement they had been harboring. They reconciled without saying another word and in the following weeks I was stunned to see a friendship developing between them.

Communion at Midnight

Another experience to consider calendaring is a prayer event. Members would gather that evening around 8 PM. We would do this on a selected Friday night. We would pray at the church alone, in groups and all together for four hours. I know it sounds lengthy, but with a well-conceived schedule you'll be amazed at how the time flies! Because fewer people come to events like these, you'll experience an intimacy with the people that you don't get in a one-hour worship service. At the end of the night, we'd prepare a table with candles and the elements of the Lord's Supper. A couple of deacons did this while other activities were going on. At midnight I invited the group to follow me to the room. We walked into a room with a large table and the elements. It was the closest I've ever felt to being a part of an early Church experience. We sang familiar choruses and we shared what the Lord's Supper meant to each of us and then at the end we took communion. This became one of the most anticipated events on the church calendar.

Other ideas:

- **The Nails:** Before passing the elements, pass nails to each row and invite the worshipers to press the nail against their palm to remember the suffering of Christ and then pass it to the next person of the row.
- **Planned Spontaneity:** Before passing the bread have someone stand in the congregation and sing, "Sweet Little Jesus Boy." Then before passing the cups, have another singer sing "Were You There When the Crucified my Lord" As the benediction the congregation is led to sing the last verse of "Were You There" (Where you there when He rose up from the grave.)
- **Family Communion:** Invite people to come to the front as families or as groups to share the elements together. As Deacons make sure to include singles and people away from their family to join *your* family so no one takes the Lord's Supper Alone.

- **Deyanu:** Use the following responsive reading adapted from an ancient Hebrew litany called “Deyanu.” The congregation only has to repeat after each phrase. “It would have been enough.”

If we knew Jesus as Savior but we were never promised me eternal life.

It would have been enough us.

If we knew Jesus as Savior, were promised eternal life and never knew that He experienced our pain

It would have been enough for us

If we knew Jesus as Savior, were promised eternal life, knew that he experienced our pain but were not given His words and strength.

It would have been enough for us.

If we knew Jesus as Savior, were promised eternal life, knew that he experienced our pain, were given His words and strength and never knew Him as friend.

It would have been enough for us.

If we knew Jesus as Savior, were promised eternal life, knew that He experienced our pain, were given His words and strength, knew Him as friend but never had a chance to have a spiritual family.

It would have been enough for us.

But we do and He did.

Jesus wanted us to remember. My prayer is that we will

remember and experience the power of His sacrifice and every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper we get a little closer to the glory of Christ.

The Truth About Significance

Our significance is not based:

on how we look,

what we do,

what we achieve,

how much experience we have,

when we graduate,

how much we make,

how we play,

who our friends are

the things we accomplish

the good deeds we do

where we were born

the notes we can sing or play
the messages we preach
the battles we've won.

And our significance is not deflected by:

The scars on our body
the hurt that we feel
the past we want to forget
a bleak tomorrow
a job loss
a parenting failure
the label – divorced
the demons we battle
the death we face
the depression we can't seem to shake
the tragic choices we make
by friends who forsake
the 15 minutes 10 years ago we wish we could erase
our relapses and reboots
our poor financial decisions
the number on the scale
the people who criticize us

the ones who reject us

the ones who neglect us.

Our significance is best defined by a holy God who sent His only Son to be falsely condemned and violently murdered in our place so that we could be called His beloved.

Simple is Better

The sad tale of Bernie Madoff reminds us of the hubris, greed, and tyranny that lurks in every heart of flesh. The inventor of the world's greatest Ponzi scheme began his descent into madness out of the deep cavernous craving for more. How about us? Certainly we're not Bernie, but a little Bernie resides in all of us. What owner of a 401K doesn't squirm as he watches the Dow fall 4% in a day? What guy doesn't look at a nice car, a bigger house, a better position without that whisper for more. Jesus calls us to a greater adventure: the adventure of simplicity. Why is it that most lottery winners report being less happy than before they won it? Here's an even better question: Why spend 50 years accumulating wealth when an eternity awaits us? That's something to invest in. Live simply in this life and enjoy the extravagance of joy in the next.

It all begins with simplicity. Simplicity says: It wasn't mine in the first place, so I don't have to fight to own it. It's best given away. And once I do, life becomes less difficult. Fewer locks. Fewer statements. Less paperwork. Less maintenance. We can whittle life down to important things and

we see that the best things in life are not found in malls. Needful things become fewer. Beans, Rice and water will begin to taste better than burgers and sodas. The pace slows down, the rashes disappear and sleep is less frenetic even in dreams. The body understands itself more, even on a cellular level because we were never created to endure the stress of obsession and hyper-accumulation. Preoccupation with phantom concerns and paper tigers dissolve. We encounter God because we have fewer things to hide behind. In Matthew 5-6 (*the Sermon on the Mount*) Jesus offers this truth more than once. Treasures on earth are **so** not eternal. Birds are happier. They don't worry about their kids when they fly away. They don't stay up late freaking out about the shortage of worms in the month of June. Just look at those birds and you'll forget the bucks.

I Can Use THAT Guy

I am so thankful that God didn't candy coat the chaotic journey of men in the Bible. We're easily intimidated by guys who seem to glide through life with little mess, a perfect backyard, six-pack abs and a white-hot marriage.

Instead, God gives us a book that reminds us on every page that He uses men who are still trying to figure things out. When I have one of those *man-what-was-I-thinking* moments I remember Abraham who actually said to Pharaoh about his wife, "No, she's not my wife, she's uh... my sister. Yeah, that's it! My sister!"

When I think about my embarrassing, *trip-over-my-own-feet-to-save-my-integrity* moments, I think about Joseph who, when

propositioned by Potiphar's wife, admirably ran away so fast he literally lost his clothes. We celebrate his virtue, but we have to agree that he needed a better belt.

Eutychus must be thanking God that there wasn't YouTube in the first century because a video of him falling out of a three story building during Paul's Bible Study in Acts 20 would have gone viral.

One universal truth of man is that we've all missed a rung, slept inappropriately, and said some epically stupid things and the exact time we shouldn't have. The mic was on, the occasion was not apropos, our judgment was obscured or we just plain blew it. Period.

But it's all there in the Bible and God manages get the glory and make something amazing in spite of all the kooky conundrums we manufacture in our spare time. This is the book I love because it makes me feel like God could actually use a enigmatic, flawed, perplexing man like me. In fact, the Bible hints to the fact that He not only works with people like us but He kind of enjoys telling the story. It's almost like he's saying, "Look at this! I can even use that guy!"

7 Reasons Why We Don't Need Gun Reform

(...and why none of them make any sense to me.)

(Note these are my opinions only and not necessarily the opinions of my workplace or church.)

After every mass shooting we are rebuked that now is not the

time to talk about gun legislation. Is there a better time?

As believers, many feel a strange reverence toward their guns. I'm not a gun expert or politician. I do, however, believe that we have to hold our representatives accountable for facilitating the culture of violence we have created.

Below are 7 reasons why we don't need gun reform and why ***none of them*** make any sense to me.

1. "The second amendment declaring our right to bear arms protects us from a government that we might have to defend ourselves against."

Let's look logically at this argument. Our government has nuclear weapons. Do you believe that owning semi-automatic weapons will somehow protect you from the fire power of the greatest military arsenal the world has ever known?

2. "Banning certain types of guns will not decrease the power of crazy people to kill."

That's just not true. We have the distinction of having more mass shootings than countries that don't allow semiautomatic weapons. The U.S. has 5% of the world's population and 30% of the mass shootings over the past ten years.

3. "If we ban military-styled semiautomatic weapons, only the bad guys will have them. How will we defend ourselves when we are so outgunned?"

I don't know about where you are, but I've never seen anyone walking around on a daily basis with a semiautomatic weapon to defend themselves from the bad guys. The federal government banned military-style semiautomatic assault weapons for 10 years between 1994 and 2004, and deaths from mass shootings fell. Once the ban was lifted the number of mass shootings skyrocketed.

4. "We are no worse than any country when it comes to homicides by gun shooters."

There's never been a more salacious and pernicious lie. We have 29 gun fatalities per million. the closest country is

Switzerland at 7.1 per million.

5. “We need to just pray.”

The Book of James warns us that faith without works is dead. It's time for our representatives work on this issue instead of playing political games and pocketing copious amounts of Super PAC money. If a person prays for her lost friend to come to know Jesus and never tells them about Jesus, is that she truly engaged in the effort?

6. “We will be taking away our right to hunt.”

No one needs a semiautomatic with armor-piercing bullets to shoot a deer. Make it a fair sport and use a standard riffle or shotgun. Using such firepower doesn't make it a very interesting sport.

7. “Guns don't kill people. People kill people.”

Right. But people use **military-styled semiautomatic weapons** to kill large numbers of people. Rather than falling back on some easily spoken platitude, think logically that certain people with the military style weapons will kill more people than people with pistols and standard rifles.

The Holy Season Begins With Stopping

As a native Louisianan, I grew up in the midst of king cake, gaudy beads, and all things purple and green. I don't understand it all and when I ask, everyone has a different take on the nuances of this season. One thing that I love, after all the weird, freaky rites of late winter, is the beginning of the Holy Season. Some may look at it suspiciously. Lent to them is the by-product of laundry dryers

and nothing more.

But we all need to burn some grave clothes every now and then. The holy season just happens to provide a schedule for it.

Here are a few things we can all stop doing this year even if we ancient liturgists.

- **We can all stop placing expectations on everybody or anybody.** We pray and expect great things from God- as we should. But when we heap expectations on others we all risk disappointment. When we stop expecting things from people we tend to be happier with them. And every gift and promise of growth we experience from them becomes a wonderful surprise full of grace.
- **We can all stop just getting through the day** and start being an active participant in the day. May me stop enduring and ask God for holy resilience and the gift of moment-by-moment abundant living.
- We can **stop blaming**. Blaming was one of the first things we started doing when the mess began. The problem is that blaming never works on any level. Indeed, blame fuels the cultural narrative of racism, pride and pious pigeonholing, attitudes. We must change the conversation.
- **We can stop worrying about the government**, pay our taxes and focus on the things we can actually change in our community.
- For that matter, we could **stop worrying. Period.** (This will be impossible but it is something of which to strive.) The only one allowed to worry is God and He's not. For me, every time I start to worry I'll bring it to God and worry to him. Actually, that is what we call prayer.

The Holy Season leads us toward the cross and challenges us to stop being so tethered to the world. Everybody can do lent. You don't need a robe, an incense burner, or a bingo

tournament. Stop doing internal things like these and it will change you.

Enjoy stopping and let's have some fish.

The Most Surprising Thing about Family

Perhaps the most *surprising* thing about our journey as a family is that it *is* so *surprising*. The most predictable thing about life is its singular unpredictability. Think about all the things that you've experienced in your family that caused you to shake your head and say, "Well, I didn't see that coming."

I'd venture to say that most of us who grew up watching TV dramas where the dog was lost and then found, or the misunderstanding finally clarified, or the seemingly impossible rescue was attained in 59 minutes with room for ten minutes of Madison Avenue's best pitches to boot. But then we encounter the glorious, sometimes maddening concept of REAL LIFE.

We look back on this adventure and discover that instead of 2.5 kids, including male and female actually turned into all boys or all girls or one adopted, or one magical downs

syndrome child, or no biological kids but three international adoptions. We look back on our journey and say, "Wow, I didn't see that coming."

We head off for that planned paradise at Wally World with all bags neatly packed, prepared for every eventuality and then find ourselves holed up in the hotel room riding out the storm of the century, having the time of our lives playing board games and eating cheese nips.

Ah yes! These are the moments that we look back on and say, "Wow God, I didn't see that coming but help me remember how incredibly, astoundingly grand it was. We realize that the greatest joy of our small, fleeting adventure is often what happens on the journey rather than the destination. Our agendas are often blown to kingdom come and all we have is a story. And the story is far more transcendent than our pseudo-sacred agenda that we so carefully crafted in our imagination.

Sometimes it takes car crashes, health crises, diaper disasters, canceled flights, split jeans and chicken pox to get us to where God wants us to be. And when we get there we dust ourselves off and do the dance.

My cautious nature, so attracted to spread sheets, games plans and satellite navigators is often reminded that life is a precarious narrative that is intricately woven together in a divine, sometimes dubious backstory of spiritual adventure. Even the small moments of surprise rise to the surface as signs that we aren't alone. We are being guided by Someone who sees the bigger story and knows exactly what we need. This is the very definition of family— a band of souls brought together through blood, blessing and bedtimes. We do life together and we find that there's always a place we can call home. It really doesn't have anything to do with brick and mortar. It's all about love and belonging. Unpredictable? Yes. Unnecessary? Never!

And at the end of the road, with gray heads and crooked smiles, we can look back on it all and say to our beloved family, "Man, I didn't see that coming but I'm sure glad it came!"

Blame or Bless

There is nothing worse than the sound of cars colliding. A few weeks ago I heard the sound. It was so loud, I first thought someone had hit *my* car. It was on the side of a busy, complicated intersection. After the collision, a man jumped out of his car infuriated and screamed immediately about how the car he hit was too close the shoulder of the road. Inside the other car, a young mother, obviously pregnant was attending to her daughter in a car seat, panic-stricken, weeping and obviously in shock. As we called for help, the man continued to plead that this accident was not his fault. Nothing he said would be quotable here, of course.

After I got home, still reeling from what I had witnessed, I felt this absolute rage welling up inside me. I couldn't shake it. How could a man who had just hit a pregnant woman be so consumed with his own innocence? He was interested in blame. As men in every instance of life, we can't be focused on blame. We are never a blessing when we blame. The last thing we should want to be is the guy that heaps heavy burdens on the hurting, broken people we encounter. When blame becomes our default position, we are incapable of empathy,

responsibility and love. Since the garden days of Eden, when the first man gave a lame excuse to his Creator, we've been blaming other people. The truth is blame never helps. It stunts your spiritual growth and destroys your character. Remember, when we stand before God, we won't give an account for other people's lives, only our own.

12 Things I've Learned From My Sons

As the father of four sons I've picked up a lot of life experiences and I understand much more about the journey to manhood than I did when I began. Here are a dozen things I learned in the process.

1. There are a million types of odors that can emit from their bedrooms, cars and duffle bags. One day with my guys could send a bloodhound into shock and awe.
2. Their competitive nature can spring forth in almost any sort of daily experience from car seat assignments, trampoline brawls, frog populations in their bedrooms, and superpowers they are convinced they have.



3. They have more words for gas than Eskimos have words for snow.
4. In a matter of one day during puberty they go from

inappropriate nakedness at the drop of a hat to the sudden modesty of an Amish elder.

5. Unlike the girls, when it comes to the boys, clothes are no big deal. Just make sure the five year old doesn't get creative and wear his underwear over his pants.



6. Another note about apparel... Always, *always* check the pockets before washing. Pockets are usually the storage and filing compartments for all types of boy-stuff that can ruin the clothes or ruin washing machines or both.
7. Boys have no concept of time, when they are in "time-out" for five minutes, it is the equivalent of a presidential term. If it is a day at the amusement park,



after 10 hours—"They just got there."

8. The boys, I have discovered, are far more gullible than the girls. They easily accept Big Foot sightings, zombie apocalypses, U.F.O.s, and the existence of organic Capt'n Crunch Berry.
9. For boys, unlimited soft serve ice cream is the closest they will come to a spiritual experience before the age of accountability. It's so unbelievable that their brains can't process the idea.
10. Emergency rooms are an unavoidable destination (and you'll be back. Again. And again.) They will go there and so will you, with stories and explanations that will

seem impossible to you even though you, yourself, witnessed the feat of daring they attempted.

11. Unlike in the movies, animals *will* be harmed in the raising of this child. Boys don't intentionally harm or torture them. And the animals always survive. But there are just certain things boys want to try out. They learn that large dogs should not be ridden as horses and pillowcases don't work well as cat-parachutes when catapulted from the roof of the house.
 12. In the end, boys do grow up and you'll have a lifetime of stories to tell. You'll also learn to love the Sharpie™ Dinosaur drawings on your white leather couch.
-