

Out of the Kiddie Pool

Matthew 5:21-37; 1st Corinthians 3:1-9

CWZepp, BWCOB, February 12, 2017

About 12 years ago, around this time of year, I went skiing for the first, and to date only, time. I had finally caved to the pressure from our youth at the Mountville Church of the Brethren to organize a Ski Retreat. Not being a skier, I was not very enthusiastic about the prospect, but with the door opened in a moment of weakness, one of our families got the ball rolling and made things happen, and next thing I knew I was strapping on skis.

Now I will be the first to admit I am not an athletic person. But generally speaking, I do not have a lot of fear when it comes to physical activities – just a lack of skill. That is NOT the case with skiing. I am pretty well terrified of even the thought of plunging down a mountain at speed.

But that didn't keep me from the slopes on that youth retreat. I bravely got on all my rented equipment and headed for the "bunny slope" where I was signed up for a beginners' learn-to-ski lesson. The instructor put us through our paces, teaching us all the essentials – french fries and pizza slices being the parts I remembered most (maybe I was hungry at the time). After our lesson and a few practice runs, we hit the slopes.

Or in my case, I should more properly say I hit the slope. I don't know how many runs I took down the bunny slope that day, but it was quite a few. By the end of the day when I turned in my skis, I was feeling pretty good about myself. I had mastered – no I had conquered – the bunny slope! And so reads my skiing resume: Master of the beginners' run; Conqueror of the bunny slope. That at no less than one ski resort, the name of which I have now forgotten.

I got to thinking about that Ski Retreat again for the first time in a long while as I was working on this sermon and reading a story about Atul Gawande¹. In addition to being a surgeon and public health researcher in Boston, Gawande is also a professor in the Department of Health Policy and Management at Harvard Medical School and a staff writer for *Slate* and *The New Yorker*. He has written three bestselling books and received a MacArthur fellowship "genius grant." But don't think that Gawande is purely a career man. He is married and has three children. And in his "free time" he directs a center for health systems innovation and is the chairman of a nonprofit organization which works to make surgery safer around the world.

Now when confronted by a man of such accomplishments, most of us probably can't help but feel a bit inadequate. Gawande is one of those people who seems to be great at everything. Even a Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist like *New York Times* reporter Charles Duhigg felt that way when he was confronted by the accomplishments of Gawande. In his book *Smarter Faster Better: The Secrets of Being Productive in Life and Business*, Duhigg talks about how awestruck he was by Gawande. And this is what he has to say – "*I felt like I was playing in the kiddie pool, while Atul was swimming in an Olympic.*"²

¹ "Jesus' Stretch Goals." *Homiletics*. Vol. 29, No. 1. (2017). pp. 53-57. Additional material adapted from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atul_Gawande

² Quoted in "Jesus' Stretch Goals," p. 53.

That image spoke to me. I don't know why, but when I read it, my mind went immediately to that bunny slope, where I was quite content to spend my one day as a skier while most of our youth were having "fun" hurtling down the face of the mountain at the speed of terror. And I confess that my initial reaction was something like "well, the kiddie pool ain't that bad." I mean, at least it would keep you cool on a hot day, right?

But as I read on, I became a bit more uneasy with my initial reaction. Duhigg wasn't content with the kiddie pool. Instead, he became interested in learning more about how some people can successfully tackle so much, an inquiry which led to the writing of his book. One of his key findings is that successful people stretch themselves. They make big goals, and then work toward them. And so Duhigg recommends those wanting to be successful to create "stretch goals" – ambitions that will inspire motivation and dreams..

It sounds simple, and Duhigg is certainly not the first to suggest that the more ambitious we are, the more we will do. But when I thought about it in the context of his kiddie pool comment – or my one-day bunny slope mastery – something clicked into place for me. I never ventured beyond the bunny slope primarily because I never wanted to do so. I did not desire in any real way to be a skier. I only wanted to make it through the day unscathed.

In truth, that is how I often approach my life and faith. More often than not, I just want to make it through the day, and I don't give much thought to where I am going or why or what I am doing beyond that. I want to do just enough to make it through each day without messing up or making more work for myself. I doubt that I am alone in that.

In Lewis Carroll's classic *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice encounters the Cheshire Cat at a point where she isn't sure which road she should take. So she asks the Cat which is the right way to go. The Cat asks her where she is going, and Alice replies that she isn't sure. The Cat's sardonic response: "If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there."³

Which brings us to today's scripture lessons. The reading from Matthew comes out of the "red letter" portion of the Bible, Jesus' teaching straight out of the Sermon on the Mount. We could spend many sermons and Sunday School classes discussing the teachings we find in this section. They seem almost impossible to live into. Not only should we not murder, we shouldn't have any anger or hostile thoughts or words about another. If we are at odds with anyone, we shouldn't even offer a gift at the altar before we have worked it out. Not only should we not commit adultery, we should not even look at another with desire. Not only should we keep any vows we have made, we shouldn't even make them. And the list goes on beyond the section Ben read from the Lectionary today.

But what we didn't hear today is what Jesus says right before he offers these teachings. In verse 20 – immediately before today's reading begins, Jesus says, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."⁴ Now remember, the scribes and Pharisees were the experts in the law and in living according to the law. They were masters of the boundaries – gurus who could tell you exactly what the law required – what actions or behaviors crossed the line and what was needed to be enough to meet its demands.

³ Ibid, p. 57.

⁴ Matthew 5:20, *NRSV*.

But Jesus tells his disciples, in effect, that's great. The law is good, and I'm not here to contradict it. But the law is only the beginning, and the kingdom of heaven lies well beyond its boundaries and confines. If following the Law is your goal, the scribes and Pharisees can help you with that. But if the kingdom of heaven is your goal, following the law – even perfectly – is not enough. You are going to have to stretch yourself. You are going to have to grow, and keep growing. And then Jesus proceeds to list six examples of how his disciples should strive to go beyond the demands of the law, the first four of which comprise today's gospel text.

Avoiding murder and adultery, honoring marriage commitments and vows made – all good things. But Jesus wants us to stretch ourselves beyond those requirements of the law. Seek reconciliation with those you are at odds with, and train your hearts and minds to let go of anger and hostility. Seek to honor marriage relationships in heart and mind, and not only in deed. Speak the truth and honor your word at all times, not just when you are under oath. These are stretch goals worthy of the kingdom.

When we move to our other scripture reading for today, from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, I think we find something similar. Paul writes that he can't speak to the Corinthian church as spiritual people, because they have gotten stuck in the infancy of their faith. The primary reason he states is that they are divisive and quarreling among themselves over the teachers with whom they align themselves. You can almost hear the frustration in Paul's voice as he writes about their various factions – Who is Paul? Who is Apollos? They are but servants of a greater purpose – a purpose which the Corinthian church had apparently lost sight of. When would they be ready for solid, spiritual food? When would they stretch themselves to become God's field, God's building, the kingdom of God they were meant to incarnate?

Think about this – We've all seen what happens when someone brings a baby into a room full of adults. Suddenly, these ostensibly intelligent people, having polite, adult conversation, turn into a bunch of goofballs. The tone of their voices jumps a few octaves, and they start babbling with a ridiculous barrage of mispronounced words – "Aren't you a cute, widdle guy?" They begin to make funny faces and have an uncontrollable urge to gently shake the baby's tiny fingers or toes. "Baby talk" we call it – the catchall phrase for both the sounds an infant makes as she works at learning language and the high frequency pidgin English the adults around her use to try to evoke the baby's smile or cooing conversation. Now we know that the language babies hear is key to their development, and while mom and dad are appropriately gaga over their little one, it's the use of proper language that helps a baby develop a full vocabulary early in life. "Baby talk" may be cute, but it's the use of good words, properly pronounced and used often, that actually leads to mature speech.⁵

Point is, we can't do baby talk forever and still expect a child to grow up with a mature vocabulary. And that applies to Christians and to the church as well. While Paul says that he has up to this point been feeding the Corinthian church only "milk" – "baby talk" if you will – he is clearly moving beyond that stage now with his letter. Apparently, he believes the Corinthians need to stretch themselves to grow beyond their current stage. It is time for them to get out of the kiddie pool and start swimming in the deep end. It's time for them to grow into the church and the followers of Jesus that they were meant to be.

⁵ "Baby Talk." *Homiletics*. Internet: http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93040802

So what does all that mean for us? If, like me, most of us have tendencies toward complacency and contentedness in our lives of faith, perhaps we could use a reminder of our stretch goals. Perhaps we need some encouragement to get out of the kiddie pool, or off the bunny slope in my case. To that end, here are just a few examples of ways that we can stretch ourselves in faith, and continue to grow into the followers of Jesus that we are meant to be:

1. Immerse ourselves in scripture.

Some of us just finished a year-long program of reading through the entire Bible. That is certainly a worthy stretch goal! But it doesn't matter where or how we begin. In fact, a teacher whom I recently heard speak encouraged us to just read the Sermon on the Mount over and over again, every day, and only move on when we had mastered its contents. A bit extreme, perhaps, but the fruits of such a discipline would surely bear fruit worthy of a stretch goal.

2. Engage in the life and discipline of prayer.

I feel a bit silly naming this, because most any kid that has attended Sunday School can tell you that Christians should pray and read the Bible. But our ancestors in the faith have attested to the power of prayer. Perhaps a secondary stretch goal for most of us would be to be as intentional about listening prayer as we are about speaking prayer.

3. Invest in relationships and reconciliation.

I was recently reminded in a newsletter article by Lancaster COB Associate Pastor Cindy Lattimer that most teachings of Jesus such as loving our enemies, turning the other cheek, and doing to others as you would have them do to you requires close proximity with others. "There is no love from afar," she writes – "we must engage with, interact with, "BE" with people to love them. And the circle of who we are called to love keeps widening – Enemies, people who are unkind to you, people who strike out at you, people who beg from you."⁶ Love isn't a solo act, and so we need to be engaged with others to live a life of love.

4. Work for justice and peace.

Who in our community lives on the margins? Where is there violence? Who is oppressed or suffering? How might we bring good news to these persons and situations? How we might shine the Christ light in the darkness? How might we live the love of God in our world? How might we be salt and light, as Jesus calls us to be? This is the goal that requires us to get up and go.

I know that I often need to be reminded to step out of the kiddie pool and go swimming in the deep waters of my baptism. I constantly need to be called to stretch beyond my comfort zone – to grow deeper and more faithful to the calling to which I have been called. I suspect that we all do. And so I leave us with this reminder – the greatest commandment named by Jesus – that we love the Lord with all our hearts, all our souls, and all our minds, and our neighbors as ourselves⁷. This is the ultimate stretch goal, one which we can spend our entire lives pursuing and never fully attain. But as long as we are striving for it, we'll be out of the kiddie pool, and swimming in the deep waters where Jesus is calling us to life abundant and everlasting in the kingdom.

May it be so

⁶ Cindy Lattimer, "From the Pastor's Desk." *Brethren Highlights*. [Lancaster Church of the Brethren Newsletter]. February 2017. p. 3.

⁷ Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28