

February 27, 2011  
Eighth Sunday After Epiphany  
Mark 1:29-39  
Isaiah 40: 28-31

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### *The Tipping Point*

Malcolm Gladwell says that, “the best way to understand the emergence of fashion trends, the ebb and flow of crime waves, or...the rise of teenage smoking, or the phenomena of word of mouth, or any number of the mysterious changes that mark every day life is to think of them as epidemics. Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do.” (The Tipping Point. 7) In his fascinating book, *The Tipping Point*, Gladwell examines the characteristics of epidemics and why and when a trend, idea or virus, catches, tips into success and becomes an epidemic.

He maintains that epidemics have three characteristics: they are contagious; little things have big effects and change happens in an epidemic not gradually, but in one dramatic moment. The tipping point is the time when those three factors come together and the epidemic is unleashed.

The tipping point itself also has three characteristics. The first he calls “The law of the few,” the idea that a few particular people can make an enormous difference. The second is “The Stickiness Factor,” the idea that for a variety of confluent reasons, some ideas or trends or viruses stick, they don’t wash off, the idea doesn’t go in one ear and out the other. The third factor is “The Power of Context,” the idea that the situation in which something happens matters greatly.

Gladwell uses the story of Hush Puppies, the classic American brushed-sued shoe to illustrate a classic Tipping Point. In 1994 sales were down to 30,000 pairs a year and the company that owned Hush Puppies, Wolverine, was seriously considering phasing out the shoe. “But then,” Gladwell says, “something strange happened. At a fashion shoot, two Hush Puppies executives...ran into a stylist from New York who told them that the classic Hush Puppies had suddenly become hip in the clubs and bars of

downtown Manhattan.” Apparently people were scarfing up the shoes from Mom and Pop stores and second hand outfits in Soho and the Village.

“By the fall of 1995, things began to happen in a rush.” Two famous designers called wanting to feature Hush Puppies in their spring collections. Pee-wee Herman bought a couple of pairs. “In 1995, the company sold 430,000 pairs of the classic shoe, and the next year it sold four times that and the year after that still more. . .

“How did that happen? Those first few kids, whoever they were, weren’t deliberately trying to promote Hush Puppies. They were wearing them precisely because no one else would wear them. Then the fad spread to two fashion designers who used the shoes to peddle something else---haute couture. The shoes were an incidental touch. No one was trying to make Hush Puppies a trend, but that is exactly what happened.” (5)

It takes a few exceptional people to make epidemics tip, people who think or behave, or see things differently from most of us.

Gaetan Dugas, the so-called Patient Zero of AIDS, the French-Canadian flight attendant who boasted 2,500 sexual partners across North America was linked to at least 40 of the earliest cases of AIDS from New York to California.

Continuing with the HIV analogy for a moment, brings us to the second necessary ingredient in the Tipping Point cocktail: the stickiness factor. It is known that HIV has been around for a while and one interesting thing is that in the 1950s the strains of the virus were a lot different from today’s strains. As Gladwell observes, “The HIV epidemic tipped in the 1980s, in short, not just because of the enormous changes in sexual behavior in the gay communities that made it possible for the virus to spread rapidly. It also tipped because HIV itself changed. For one reason or another, the virus became a lot deadlier. Once it infected you, you stayed infected. It stuck.” (24)

The third component in the Tipping Point, the power of context, suggests that we are perhaps more influenced by our environment than we think. One famous example that Gladwell cites is the stabbing death of a young Queens woman named Kitty Genovese. “Genovese was chased by her assailant and attacked three times on the street, over the

course of half an hour, as thirty-eight of her neighbors watched from their windows. During that time, however, none of the thirty-eight witnesses called the police.” (27)

Many explanations have been proffered to explain this “bystander problem.” What Bibb Latane of Columbia University and John Darley of New York University found in their experiments is that “When people are in a group...responsibility for acting is diffused. They assume that someone else will make the call, or they assume that because no one else is acting, the apparent problem...really isn’t a problem...In the case of Kitty Genovese, then...the lesson is not that no one called despite the fact that thirty-eight people heard her scream; it’s that no one called *because* thirty-eight people heard her scream. Ironically, had she been attacked on a lonely street with just one witness, she might have lived.” (28)

Today as protests and turmoil spread across the Middle East, it’s intriguing to wonder if Tunisia or Egypt was the tipping point and if, in part, the use of Facebook in its immediate intimacy became the modern day Law of the Few. The protests that began in Madison Wisconsin are said to be “going viral” across the country, catching on, spreading, sticking to people.

The Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, the Power of Context. I don’t think Malcolm Gladwell was the first to know about the Tipping Point, I think it was God. From the beginning of time God seems to have chosen a few good people to lead the charge, Adam, Eve, Moses, Abraham, Jacob, Leah, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, Ruth, Paul, John, Andrew, Simon and on. I don’t list Jesus because I see him not as one of the few, but as the fly tape, the taffy, the Krazy Glue, the Stickiness Factor Supreme. There was just something about him, about the message he taught, the things he did, the way he did them, that seems to have stuck with people. And it stuck because the time was in some way right, the situation amenable, the ground fertile, the social and cultural climate ripe for hearing and receiving the gospel, the good news. The Greeks have a word for his kind of time, it is *kairos* and means “the right time.”

Our passage from Mark’s gospel comes at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, after his temptation in the wilderness. What was the first thing he did when he left Satan and

the sand? He gathered his few, he called the disciples together. Then he started healing, but from the first he did so in unconventional ways, challenging the accepted social and cultural norms. He healed on the Sabbath, he touched people believed to be ritually unclean, and he commanded even the evil spirits. By so doing he awakened and intrigued, he functioned outside the expected and in so doing became sticky.

Our passage begins right after Jesus and the disciples leave the synagogue and go to Simon and Andrew's house. Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law. In and of itself this was out of bounds. First, he was healing on the Sabbath, second he was touching a woman who was ill, and therefore, unclean. But things only get more curious after that. Remember it is night time and Mark says that all who were sick or possessed by demons came to Jesus to be healed and that, given Jesus' growing reputation, the whole city gathered outside the house to witness the miracles. Everyone, the whole city. Sounds like movement was a foot, that things almost got out of control, that something tipped.

But then in the vein of doing the unexpected, Jesus did something strange. The next verse says, "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a desert place, and there he prayed." He got up. What did he get up from? If we were to assume that he rose from slumber, we'd be wrong, I think. Remember that he was healing the whole city; the crowds were leaning against the walls of the house, pressing in for his miraculous touch. No, he didn't leave his bed, he left the people, still reaching out for help and healing. He simply came to the end of his strength or his will and called it quits. Pushing his way through the crowd, he left them astonished at his abandonment. Maybe they thought he was going out for some fresh air or a drink. They didn't follow him right away, assuming that, of course, he'd be back. But when he didn't return, Simon and his friends went looking and when they found him, they hollered, incredulous, "What are you doing? Everyone is waiting for you! You can't just abandon them! You have responsibilities. What in heaven's name are you doing sitting out here in this deserted place all by yourself?"

That is one reason why it's hard to pray, isn't it? There is so much clamoring at us, demanding our attention and diligence that we think we can't afford the time to walk

away and pray. *Just pray.* Jesus didn't go out to pray when he'd finished his work, he didn't find time to pray when everything else was done, he left things undone. He left people undone, bleeding wrecks of human beings. He walked away from people who were sick and pleading with him. He walked away also from the great accolades he must have been receiving. Imagine the ego gratification, the praise, the wonder, the affirmation for him and his ministry. He knew that without prayer, without God, he simply could not go on. His well was dry. Maybe he thought that if he didn't reconnect with God, instead of healing people he'd start hurting them. Jesus' actions often seemed peculiar and out of the ordinary precisely because he never lost sight of the most important connection, the source of his strength, his God. This, I think, above all else made him sticky. People looked at what he did and were bewildered and entranced at the same time.

Hearing the disciples' pleas, Jesus does get up but he does not return to the town from which he has come. Instead, faithful to the spread of the epidemic, he goes on to new towns, new territories.

I find it interesting to view the spread of the gospel, the early growth of Christianity as an epidemic. I am particularly intrigued by the stickiness of Jesus because I have felt it myself. Sometimes, try as I may, I can't get clean of him. I wipe him from one hand only to find him firmly affixed to the other. What he asks is always beyond the boundary of what I find comfortable or familiar, sometimes very far beyond, and, frankly, I'd rather not have him stuck all over me. But he has a way of remaining even if I think I'm clean at last. He has a way also of being close when I feel most alone, of not deserting me when I feel utterly abandoned.

Certainly there are times or situations when something I've heard before suddenly sinks in, for no apparent reason. It's worth asking ourselves, what those times are, who the people are who carry the message we need to hear and how it is that it might come to stick in our hearts. What might we need to do to get infected with faith? My suspicion is that no matter how faithful a person you believe yourself to be, you still yearn for more, you still want a closer walk with God. Might we postulate from Gladwell's theory that we

could create a tipping point in our own lives? How would we do that? Change our situation, our environment? Focus deeply on a few people whom we admire and from whom we feel we can learn or catch the message? One of the great tenets of religious education is that faith is not taught but caught. Telling someone about God isn't nearly as powerful as being a living witness, an inspiration, an infecting agent. We tend to catch faith from other people, like a virus.

One thing we have to ask ourselves is whether we want to get sticky, because once you start really living your life that way, it's apt to get messy. Previously ordered, neat parts of your life will ooze. Bank accounts won't be reliable; schedules will alter and fluctuate according to an entirely different set of demands, when, for instance, someone else needs your help or your money. What you thought your were going to do today or next year may suddenly change dramatically. Relationships will be tested because this stickiness is obviously contagious and not all people will want to get close to you.

Jesus himself even grew weary of the stickiness, of having people glom onto him all the time. For relief, for a break, for sustenance he had to leave and go off by himself to pray, to renew his strength. In one of my favorite passages in all scripture is the one Carolyn read today from Isaiah: "Have you not known, have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:28-31)

Part of the key then is to wait patiently for God, to look for God, to be on the watch for those few people who will say something or do something so courageous, so odd, so tender that it will stick in your heart and make your spirit soar like an eagle.

I can't help but recall a story from the Gulf War in 1991 that speaks to me of God's grace exhibited in human action and faith. Sometimes we feel this grace by

witnessing other people's actions, words, stories---and often times by listening to their music.

“On Saturday, minutes before the U.S. deadline for leaving Kuwait, Saddam Hussein's forces fired a Scud missile at Israel. When the sirens wailed, Zubin Mehta was conducting the Israel Philharmonic with the violinist Isaac Stern at the Jerusalem theatre. The audience donned gas masks, and the orchestra left the stage. But Mr. Stern, with awesome courage, returned to the stage and played a saraband for solo violin by Bach. When the all-clear sounded, the concert resumed.

An old Jewish custom holds that if a guest at a wedding is stricken or even dies, the service should continue nonetheless to affirm the primacy of life. In the same spirit, Mr. Stern nobly and dramatically affirmed the primacy of art and civilization, even as distant cannons thundered and missiles cut a frightening path through the sky.” (New York Times, February 25, 1991. “Topics of the Times,” op ed page, 18,1)

But while you are on the lookout for those becons of God, don't' forget that you can be that person for someone else, because God has chosen you. God is stuck on you. Big time.

Amen.