

Moving Off Center – based on John 1:43-51
Aspen Community UMC
January 18, 2009

Page 1 of 6

In the movie *Gran Torino*, a bigoted and irreverent Walt Kowalski sits in the shade of his front porch with nothing good to say – actually one obscenity after another for his Vietnamese neighbors. And then something happens and he becomes engaged with the family. He sees Tauo being harassed by a gang and he steps into action in the fashion that – well - it is vintage Clint Eastwood. He continues his offensive language but it takes on a loving attitude – and just does not have the punch it did - as he begins to liberate both himself and the family he used to hate. What caused him to change – to move off center? Let's say that to move off center is to get out of that place that keeps us from doing something that needs doing.



For Nathaniel, it was to follow Jesus. And as the scripture says, it opened up new worlds to him. Nathaniel had to let go of his prejudice about Jesus because of where he grew up - where he was from. As long as Nathaniel stuck to his prejudices he was going nowhere. He had to make a shift – he had to move out of his pattern of thinking - Maybe something like what Walt Kowalski ended up doing.

I expect we all do – from time to time. Something happens and we decide to act – to do something we otherwise would not have done.

There are all kinds of Nathaniels in the world sitting under fig trees waiting to be called into something better.¹ I expect we are all Nathaniels in some ways. We have opportunities in front of us – if we can listen well enough and let go of the inertia or the belief we can't change.

I want to talk about people who have moved from where they may have been accustomed and been willing to take on a task that appeared before them.



Rosa Parks was a seamstress by trade.

She was called – compelled by something -
when she heard the words, “You have to move to the back of the bus.”

“You have to move to the back of the bus.”

Maybe if she had not been so tired that day she would have done what she usually did.

But aren't we glad she didn't?

Imagine it in your mind – how critical a moment – in the history of this United States -
maybe even humankind. She ushered in the Civil Rights movement.

She would not move to the back of the bus.

Martin Luther King, Jr. had gone into the ministry primarily because of his father
and he always wanted to please his father – Daddy King.

He wanted a quiet life as a professor,
or possibly President of Morehouse College in Atlanta someday.

He had no plans to be a national civil rights leader.

Then he was thrust into the forefront of the Montgomery bus boycott.

He came home late one night. He was tired and he was frightened.

The phone rang, and an angry voice on the other end said,

We're gonna get you, Nigger!”

We're gonna get you, Nigger!”

He stood in his kitchen – frozen in fear.

He wanted to call Daddy King and ask what to do.

But Daddy King was not there.

Then he said it was like a voice.

“Martin, you do what's right. You stand up for justice.

I will be with you.”

That's how he told it – when he stepped out and took a risk.

Moving Off Center – based on John 1:43-51
Aspen Community UMC
January 18, 2009

Page 3 of 6

He heard his name called. He knew what God wanted.²

He moved off center.

His life was forever changed and through his life, so was the world.

And we remember him today.



Moving off center – what causes is to take action rather than to
not consider it at all – or think about it but never act -
to move from thinking or even not thinking –
to action that makes a difference for a lot of people -
or even just action that improves our lives -
improves our education – our health – or our relationships.



That is what Nathaniel did that day.

Nathaniel appeared to be as prejudiced as Walt Kowalski sitting on his porch.

He thought he knew everything he might need or want to know about Jesus.

“What good can come from Nazareth?”

We all have our excuses.

But something caused him to move out of his bias -

and it sure made a difference for him.

Again – moving off center – how does that happen?



Have you been there?

Not to the magnitude of Rosa Parks or Dr. King -

maybe not even to the magnitude of Walt Kowalski.

But surely there have been times – and perhaps it is now
that you know it is time to take some kind of action in your life
because your life is not flowing like you want it to flow.

But for whatever reason – you just don't move from thinking about it to doing it.



Moving Off Center – based on John 1:43-51
Aspen Community UMC
January 18, 2009

Page 4 of 6

The Laws of Spirit – anyone read Dan Millman's little book?

*No matter what we feel or know,
no matter what our potential gifts or talents,
only action brings them to life.
Many of us understand concepts
such as commitment, courage, and love,
but we truly know only when we can do.
Doing leads to understanding,
and action turns knowledge to wisdom.*³

The book is about a journey – a mythical journey the author enters into
while on a hike in the mountains.

He meets a wise woman. He calls the wise woman a sage.

They have encounters that demonstrate a number of
spiritual laws in everyday life.

Spiritual laws are at the heart of every religion and spiritual tradition -
he says.

I will share others from time to time -

but the encounter I share with you now is about action.

I will leave the details of the journey – the adventure – for you to read if you like.

But the wise woman – the sage –

reminded him that even the law of action contains the seeds of its opposite.

Sometimes compassion demands action,

but there is also wisdom in remaining still and quiet.

This is called the action of nonaction.

Remembering Rosa Parks – we see – yes – there is a time for action
and a time for nonaction.

You may demonstrate the greatest courage, patience, and wisdom
by remaining still

even when everything else around you tries to force you to act.

But, do we know when to act and when to be still?

The sage tells him this:

If you tend toward inertia or fear you will need to focus on the will to act
and to act bravely and decisively.

If you are likely to be impulsive in your words and actions -
you are better off to stop and take a few breaths.

Slow down and observe the impulses - without feeling compelled to act on them.

Either way, listen to the wisdom of your heart.

And that will be the way to know when to remain still and when to seize the moment.

Are you the one who is more likely to jump to action without thinking deeply about it -
or, are you more likely to be paralyzed in making a decision?

And there is a difference in acting and reacting.

It is easy when we are finally compelled by pain or fear
or when warfare breaks out in family or community –
or when our body's are ill from stress.

If we could have just acted out of our own intention earlier.
But then again – there is that inertia that sometimes keeps us
on that easy chair of good intention.

So, I guess it is good to figure out which best describes us.
Am I more likely to act on impulse and not think it through?
Or am I more likely to become immobile and unable to make a decision?
That's a way to think about what it takes to move off center.



I can't help but wonder what I would have done –
if I were Rosa - or if I were Martin –
but I am awed by the action she did not take -
and the action he did.

And I give thanks for it – and I know we all do.

And I wonder about the times in our lives when we have chosen to act or be still
and how our decisions have affected the bigger pictures of our lives.

And will we know – you and me – when the opportunity comes
that our action could make a real difference.

The teacher also reminded the student
that taking action has never been easy in this world.
There are forces of doubt and inertia everywhere –
especially in our minds and bodies.
Turning ideas into action requires energy.
There is always the easy chair of good intentions.

But one of the aspects of the law of action is this:
It is better to do what is best than not do it - and have a good excuse.

So, for the many men and women who have made a real difference in this world
because they have taken action (or nonaction)
whatever was needed at the time -
there are thousands who sat by and watched – from lack of courage – or lack of will.
But for those who considered the need
and acted on their commitment
and demonstrated their courage – wow – we owe them something
and they stand out in history -
and we gladly give thanks.

Perhaps we can be more aware of the opportunities -
and more aware of what it takes for us to move off center.

¹ Adapted from Brett Blair in "Sometimes You Have to Stay Under the Fig Tree"

² Adapted from David E. Leininger in "A Drum Major for Righteousness"

³ Dan Millman. *The Laws of Spirit: A Tale of Transformation*. Pp.73-80.