

Indispensable Wit(h)nesses: You Need a Yoda

Acts 22:1-3; Acts 5:27-42

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 9, 2009

René Rodgers Jensen

First Christian Church

Omaha, Nebraska

The Apostle Paul towers over the story of the early church more than anyone else except Jesus himself. It was Paul who relentlessly pressed the case for including Gentiles in the fold of Jesus' followers. It was Paul who ceaselessly crossed and re-crossed the Mediterranean, founding churches wherever he went. It was Paul who wrote the letters that make up much of the canon of our New Testament.

From the beginning Paul's letters were fundamental in shaping the doctrine of the church. It was Paul, in his letter to the Romans, who told us that we are saved by grace and grace alone. It was Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, who showed us that the church is the Body of Christ, and gave us the most beautiful words on love ever written. It was Paul, in his letters to the churches in Galatia and Ephesus, who insisted that Christ had come to break down all the walls that we humans erect to separate us from one another.

But how did Paul get to be Paul? What made him who he was? Who were his teachers? Who shaped and mentored him? Thanks to the book of Acts, we actually know quite a bit about Paul. In our first scripture for today, from Acts 22 (which you may find on page 143 of your New Testament), Paul is in Jerusalem. Falsely accused by some of the religious leaders of defiling the holiness of the temple by bringing in Gentiles, a near-riot has broken out. Concerned with keeping the peace, the Romans arrest Paul and are about to throw him into prison when Paul begs the Roman tribune for

permission to address the crowd. In his rather lengthy speech, Paul tells his story to the Jewish crowd, to his family of faith. Speaking in Hebrew, Paul begins by establishing his credentials as a faithful Jew.

*1 "Brothers and fathers, listen to the defense that I now make before you." 2 When they heard him addressing them in Hebrew, they became even quieter. Then he said:
3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today..."*

Paul tells them who he is, in part, by telling them who his teacher was. He invokes the name of Gamaliel, not only one of the greatest teachers of his day, but one of the greatest teachers in the annals of Judaism. There is a telling little story about Gamaliel early on in the Book of Acts.

The story is found in Acts 5 (page 123). Peter and some of the other apostles have been thrown into prison for preaching the gospel, but in one of those miraculous escapes which abound in the book of Acts, an angel sets them free and instructs them to go to the temple and resume their preaching. The high priest is understandably furious and has them re-arrested.

We begin reading at verse 27:

*27 When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, 28 saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." 29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. 30 The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. 31 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."
33 When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. 34 But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. 35 Then he said to them, "Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. 36 For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared.*

37 After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. 38 So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!"

They were convinced by him, 40 and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. 41 As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. 42 And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.

Do you hear Gamaliel's pragmatic wisdom in the advice he gives? If this thing is not of God, we have nothing to worry about. If it is of God, there is no way we can stop it. In Gamaliel's wise advice, I hear where Paul learned his own pragmatism. Though Paul was zealous in spreading the gospel, he also didn't sweat the small stuff. So he could write, *To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law... so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law...so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.*

Today we resume our sermon series on "Indispensable Witnesses"—those persons we all need to travel with us in our spiritual journey. And one of those "witnesses" that we need is a Gamaliel. We all need a Gamaliel, a wise teacher and mentor. Or to use a figure better known to us, we all need a Yoda. You remember Yoda—the Jedi master from Star Wars who tutors young Luke Skywalker in the ways of the Jedi. For those who were practically raised on Star Wars, Yoda represents the ultimate mentor and teacher and guide.

We all need a Yoda.

Leonard Sweet notes, “Each one of us needs someone to look up to, a wiser [usually but not always] older guide who can help us find our way through this new and unfamiliar landscape...[Someone] who can help us navigate those rivers of life that seem...un-crossable...who can help us move to new levels of perception and experience.” (Sweet, p. 115)

One of the great myths of our country is that of the self-made person—the man or woman who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and did it all on their own. But there’s no such thing as a self-made person. The great physicist Isaac Newton once said, “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” (Sweet, p. 116)

We all stand on the shoulders of giants. We all have needed a guide, a Gamaliel, a Yoda, to show us the way forward. This is the way life is, as was shown in a story that *60 Minutes* did several years ago. The story that illustrates the danger of thinking we can create ourselves. It all began when the park rangers at a South African wildlife preserve discovered 39 rare white rhinos had been slaughtered. To their astonishment, it turned out that the rhinos were not killed by poachers but by juvenile delinquents—juvenile delinquent elephants.

A decade earlier park officials had decided the preserve could no longer sustain the increasing population of elephants. Their solution was to kill many of the adult male elephants whose young were old enough to survive without them. These young elephants grew up fatherless.

As time went on, the young male elephants began to roam together in gangs and began to do things elephants normally don't do. They threw sticks and sprayed water at rhinos and acted like neighborhood bullies. Without dominant males around, the young

bulls became sexually active, producing excessive testosterone and exhibiting increasingly aggressive behavior. A few young males grew especially violent, knocking down rhinos and stepping or kneeling on them, crushing the life out of them. The park rangers theorized that these young teen-aged elephants were acting badly because they lacked role models. The solution was to bring in a large older male to lead them. Soon the new male established dominance and the bullying behavior stopped. The killing stopped. The young males were mentored—and saved from being killed for their destructive behavior.

Who has saved you at some critical point in your life? Who has taught you much needed lessons? Who has pointed you in the direction you need to go? Who has believed in you and encouraged you and challenged you? Who has been your Yoda? Who has been your Gamaliel?

Elijah E. Cummings, Maryland's 7th District representative told the story of one of his “Yodas” at a speech he gave at Howard University.

“I spent most of my elementary school training as an unhappy member of what then was called the third group—what we today call special education.

To this day, I remember the cold, incredulous, rejecting words of my 6th grade school counselor. "You want to be a lawyer? Who do you think you are?" When I think back to that time, I do something I have done every morning of my adult life. I thank God for the wonderful adults who gave me my head start in life: I thank God for Mr. Hollis Posey, the sixth grade teacher who listened to my dreams, who believed in my potential as a human being, and who taught to my strengths, not my limitations. And I thank God for my parents, who convinced me that I could become whatever I decided to be.

I made it out of the third group. I graduated second in my class from Baltimore City College High School. I became a Phi Beta Kappa at Howard University. I became a lawyer at the University of Maryland. I was elected to public office and rose to the position of speaker pro tem of the Maryland House of Delegates, and today I serve the people of Baltimore as a member of the Congress of the United States of America.

I survived and succeeded because of positive parental involvement, and because of Mr. Hollis Posey's belief in me, because he taught to my strengths and helped me learn and achieve in my own way.

We all need a Mr. Posey in our life, someone to teach us our strengths and help us learn and grow. We need a mentor. We need a Gamaliel. We need a Yoda.

Who has been your Yoda? I give thanks for the many Yoda's in my life. Rev. Scott who helped me to dream big. Dr. Forrest Haggard who affirmed my call into ministry. Theology professor Clark Williamson who introduced me to the intoxicating discipline of rigorous theological reflection. Old Testament professor Gerry Jantzen who taught me to love the scriptures with some of his own passion. The many saints in the church whose lives have been the best possible lesson on what it means to live a Christian life. The young who have taught me, over and over again, about wonder and possibility and who are a large part of the reason I have never lost hope.

We all need a Yoda, not just when we are young, but all through our lives. We are disciples, and disciple means "learner." We are called to continue to learn throughout our lives. Who is teaching you these days? Who is stretching your mind and heart?

And, of course, we all need to be willing to *be* a Yoda for someone else. I am so grateful for those who serve as mentors each year for our young disciples as a part of

their preparation for baptism. I know that for the rest of their lives the young disciples will remember their mentors with gratitude and love. Because the greatest lesson they will have taught our young people is that someone in the church cares about them.

Who are your Yodas? And ten or twenty or fifty years from now, who will remember *you* as their Yoda?