

Breaking Out of the Bubble Wrap
Where We Get Stuck: Virtual Action Figures
Luke 9:28-36

I think I have mentioned to you before that I'm a little bit of a politics junkie. Almost the first thing I do when I get home at night is turn on the news. And almost every day, something big has happened...because that's just the way it is these days, isn't it? I've thought often in these last few years that the national political news has become my version of Monday night football, or March Madness, or the World Series. It's entertaining. Competitive. In my own inaudible way, I cheer and I hoot, I add up the score, I watch for the strategy of the next play. I can pick those candidates, tell you what they believe, monitor their chances of winning.

In my head, I'm a political activist—informed, engaged in the democratic process, highly opinionated about many things. I never actually *do* anything. I haven't worked on a political campaign since my early 20's. I have marched in demonstrations only a handful of times in my life. I've attended City Council meetings only when my work required it of me. I vote, but that's pretty much the extent of my participation in the democratic process. I'm *virtual* activist.

There are lots of ways technology makes virtual activism possible. Not only is there a steady stream of news to make us feel connected; there's social media, that invites us all the time to feel like we're part of some movement. All you have to do is pick up your phone and scroll down. With one thumb, you can support a Twitter campaign, or join thousands of other people in liking a Facebook post. But this kind of activity can be deceptive. Technology can help connect us with people and it can make us feel like we're involved in things that are happening far away. But it can also make us think we're doing something when we've never actually moved from the comfort of our couches. We might as well be playing video games.

The temptation to watch instead of act isn't new. Go back for a minute to the story from Luke we heard a few minutes ago. Jesus took his three most trusted disciples with him one day when he climbed a hill for one of his prayer retreats. Suddenly, while they were looking right at him, he changed. He looked much holier than he usually did. The light around him shifted. Two other figures stood next to him—and they looked like Moses and Elijah. This was remarkable—not only because those two had been dead for hundreds of years, but because these were the two greatest prophets in Israel's history. The disciples--Peter and James and John--had thought before that Jesus was special, but this—this vision gave him an entirely different kind of credibility. It was an extraordinary moment. Powerful. Mystical. Something to remember.

Peter offered up his best idea for a way to memorialize this moment. 'I know! Three shrines. Three altars, right here. People will come and stop and pray. And they will always know that one day, something holy happened here.'

'You missed the point,' God's voice said. 'What I want you to do is listen to Jesus. Do what *he* tells you.'

Was it a *bad* idea Peter had to build a shrine, to remember this moment by? I don't think so. There are lots of stories in the Bible where someone builds an altar to mark a holy place. It just wasn't what *this* moment called for. Some encounters call for worship. Some for study and reflection. Some call for action. I think we often do what Peter did: when we see something that touches our heart, or hear a message that moves us, we give it a thumbs-up. We applaud, process it, maybe even enshrine it. And sometimes we miss entirely the that it's action we are being prompted to take, action that is the response being called for.

Imagine if one morning when you tell your child to make his bed, he says to you, 'You know, Dad, that's a really good idea. I'm going to think about that. In fact, I'll study it carefully. I'll give some thought to *why* you want me to make my bed. I'll do some research into the origin of the words you used to ask me. I'll try to get really clear on what it is you're saying here.'

You'd tear your hair out. *Just make the darn bed.*

You know the Good Samaritan story, that ends with the words, "Go and do likewise"? I wonder if it drives Jesus crazy when we turn that story into a Bible study.

Let me show you some people I admire. I think you may know them too.



Thirty years after this photograph was taken, the young man in the picture remains unnamed. *Time Magazine* called him the "Unknown Rebel"; he's never been identified. But there he stood on June 5, 1989, in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, China, with two shopping bags in his hands, in front of a line of tanks. There were thousands of protestors there that day; when the tanks came to clear the Square and everyone backed up, he moved forward. And for a few minutes, the tanks stopped.



This woman's name is Ceyda Sungur. She's Turkish. In 2013, she was a research assistant at Istanbul Technical University's school of urban planning. On May 28, she joined a peaceful demonstration a park Istanbul, protesting the government's plan to turn the park into a shopping center. She was standing in the wrong place when Turkish military police swept in with pepper spray and fire hoses and pointed them at her. She did not resist, but neither did she move. This

photograph went viral. She became known as the "Lady in Red", a symbol of the government's unnecessary heavy-handedness.



This is Ieshia Evans. In July 2016, the Black Lives Matter movement was calling our attention to the truth that large numbers of unarmed black men are killed during interactions with police officers. Ieshia Evans was a licensed practical nurse who lived in New York City. She had a five-year-old son. She traveled to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to take part in a Black Lives Matter demonstration after the death of Alton Sterling. It was the first protest she had ever participated in. She went to Baton Rouge, she said, because she

wanted to be able to look her son in the eyes and tell him she had fought for his freedom, his right to be safe in his own community. The police arrested her that day. They didn't drag her; she did not resist.



Emma Gonzalez is one of the kids whose face became familiar to us after the shooting of students and teachers at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Before that day, she was just a regular kid. On many days now, she's just a regular kid. She goes to college in Florida. But for more than a year after the shooting, she interrupted everything else she was doing in her junior year of high school to work, every day, organizing the March for Our Lives movement to end gun violence in America.



And this year—just this fall—we watched Greta Thunberg, a sixteen-year-old from Sweden, address the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York. When she was 15, Greta began spending school days outside the Swedish parliament, holding a sign that said “School strike for climate”. Pretty soon, other students joined her. They organized community protests they called Fridays for the Future. By 2019, those

protests grew into coordinated, multi-city, protests all over the world, demanding that the rest of us pay attention to climate change. Over a million students participated, including here in Los Altos. Last month, Greta spoke directly to UN delegates. “This is all wrong [she said to them]. I shouldn't be here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope.” And then her memorable words: “How dare you!”



Not all activists are young. Rosa Parks was 42 years old when she refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She was a seamstress. On December 1, 1955, when she was on her way home from work, Rosa Parks simply sat down at the front of a bus, in one of the seats reserved for white people, and she refused to move when the bus driver told her to. Legend has it that years later a graduate student came to her and asked her, "Why did you sit at the front of the bus that day?" Her answer wasn't about launching a

movement. Her reason was much simpler. "I sat down because I was tired." she said. I imagine that comment wasn't only about her feet being tired. That day she'd simply had enough. Her soul was tired, her heart, her whole being. She was tired of living her life by racist rules, of standing by and watching while she and everyone she knew was treated as less than fully American, fully human.

Did God whisper some specific instruction for action to each of those people? I don't know. Maybe. But I think before they began, probably none of them would have told you she, or he, was a professional activist. None of them set out to become the leader of a social movement. They were ordinary people doing ordinary things in ordinary places—just like us. Every one of them had a day job, a family, a whole life. They were children, and grandmothers. What they did probably seemed to them very small, unlikely to make much of a difference. What made *that* day different in their lives, what makes them people we know to be part of the work of changing the world for good, is that on *that* day, they had the courage to *feel* what was wrong, not just think about it from a distance. On *that day* they paid attention to what was being asked of them...and they did it.

That's the kind of person I want to be. Most of the time, no doubt, I'll still go home after work, talk to the people I love, cook dinner, spend some time sitting on the couch. I'll probably keep doing most of my political activism with the remote control in my hand. But on the day God says to me, 'Go, now. I need you to go do something you've never done before,' I want to say, 'OK. I hear you. I'm going.'