

Life-Giving Improvisations

Matthew 10:16-23 (Jesus says the Spirit of God speaks through us.)

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Redlands First United Methodist Church

Preached by Carolyn Bohler

How many of you, when you make a plan—for a vacation, a committee meeting, a job interview, or even retirement, think to yourself, “Well, if this doesn’t work the way we most want, we’ll go to ‘Plan B’”?

‘Plan B’s are “back-up plans” aren’t they? They are the plans we go to if ‘Plan A’ doesn’t work out.

A ‘Plan B’ is an alternative to the intended plan.

Improvisation is an altogether different thing. Improvisation is not even planning one thing, let alone another.

Improvisation is intentionally creating in the moment, without a premeditated plan.

The process, the creative process, **is what is intended**—the *outcome is not intended*.

With improvisation there is no ‘Plan A.’

However, that does not mean that improvisation is easy or that lazy or unprepared people should try it. Actually, the reverse is true. Improvisation is possible if and only if we are very well prepared! *Prepared*, not planned.

This week I heard that it’s the anniversary of the Spanish dance song, the *Macarena*. Remember the Macarena? Evidently there was a Flamenco dancer named Magdalena who was particularly sultry, so a song-writer improvised these lyrics: “Give joy for your body Magdalena, for your body is for giving joy.” As the song became a dance, her name, Magdalena was turned to *Macarena*. Actually, I like those lyrics, which we can all say about our own bodies, no matter their level of sultry-ness: “Give joy for our bodies, for our bodies are for giving joy.”

There was a *Flamenco Festival* in Irvine (of all places) a couple of years ago.ⁱ We did not attend, but I was fascinated with the write-up in the paper. Two dancers, each famous, were to dance a duet together. One was *Savion Glover*, a Tony Award-winning *classical tap* dancer; the other was *Yaelisa*, a brilliant Flamenco artist. At the time of the newspaper article, about a week before their performance, the dancers would choose their music. However, *their performances were to be improvised*. That meant that their dance on Tuesday night would be different from their dance on Wednesday.

What really caught my eye was what the Flamenco dancer said to the reporter, “People have said to me over the years: ‘How can you go there and improvise? That’s so risky.’ But I’m not scared. **How can I make a mistake if I don’t know what I’m going to do?**”ⁱⁱ

I truly admire the dramatic improvisation I’ve seen over the years, even as a youth group activity. We really do have to **learn how not to know what we are doing, until we do it**.

Some preachers give improvisational sermons...*some* are very good. You’ve noticed that I do not. My sermons are planned. I guess I’m not well-enough prepared.

Let’s look at the very fascinating and relevant Scripture passage in the *Gospel of Mark*. Jesus tells his disciples that he is sending them out as missionaries. He calls them sheep, which is meant as a compliment. He says his disciple-missionaries are in the same flock, so to speak, with other Jews. But Jesus tells his followers that *some* Jewish leaders will be like wolves; they will persecute these disciple-missionaries. Jesus is actually making an amusing twist to the metaphor

that was dominant in the mass media of his day. Usually it was the Jews, *including* their leaders, who were considered sheep, and *non-Jews* were referred to as wolves. I don't know whether it is frightening or comforting to realize that even in Jesus' day labels of good and bad depended upon what herd you're thought to be in!

Okay, Jesus tells his disciples that as they go out as missionaries, they will be like sheep in the midst of wolves. Then he advises them **to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. As wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.** He wants his missionary-disciples to have a good balance between: wisdom and innocence—knowledge and trust.

Jesus proceeds with this comforting advice: **Do not worry about what you are to say, for that will be given to you.** Think about what Jesus was saying to his missionaries, basically: YOU CAN IMPROVISE, if you have WISDOM and TRUST. **Don't worry about what you are to say, for that will be given you.** Jesus explained, **"It is not you who speak, but the Spirit of God who speaks."**

Flamenco and tap dancers need to know their dance forms and steps to be able to improvise. Dixieland Band musicians need to know music well if they don't have all the notes written down. But *what do we ordinary people need to know* when we just go about living, when we face ordinary challenges?

*We need to know exactly what Jesus told his disciple-missionaries: **We need to know that we can know what to do when the time comes.*** Jesus' advice wasn't just, "Have wisdom" or "Have knowledge." He **also** said, "Have innocence" or "trust." **In order to improvise we need both knowledge and trust.**

Kathy Bolte and Bill Brakemeyer have knowledge of music. Yet, they have to have trust in themselves and the Spirit of God to respond in the moment . . . to pay attention to all of us, in the moment!

We could say that in this scripture passage, Jesus encourages improvisation. He's telling his friends they don't always need to have a plan—plan A or B.

Think about Jesus' own ministry. Almost all of his physical help to people appears improvised. He told one to "get up," another "their sins are forgiven," and yet another to rub spittle in their eyes. What was perhaps *so miraculous* was Jesus' trust!

Many of us face challenges and changes in our families, challenges or changes in our jobs, in our schools. We are even making some changes in our Sunday School program for children this year. Certainly, our beloved world-full of people is hot, not only with weather, but also in conflicts.

We all benefit from these encouraging words of Jesus: **In whatever we face, we will be guided in what to do by the Holy Spirit.**

I imagine that God is a pretty good planner. I like to think that God has a "Plan A," a "Plan B," and even a "Plan C," based on our human responses. However, I bet that God is also a Master at Improvisation. I think that *God created us with both the ability to plan and to improvise.*

I've been thinking that perhaps 55% of parenting is life-giving improvisation . . . maybe more! We simply cannot plan all of our parenting—we have to go with whatever knowledge we have and then to trust, trust, trust—God, our children, and ourselves.

I dedicate this sermon to Sunday School teachers. All teachers, just as parents, must plan **and** improvise.

Families improvise as we care for those who are vulnerable. We do our best to get knowledge, but often it left up to us to implement that wisdom, and to trust. We lean on the constancy of God the Divine Jazz Band Leader, who helps us to meet every challenge.

The first time our son did his laundry when he went to college he stood at the dryer and wondered how to get all his clean clothes up several flights of stairs with the fewest wrinkles. Then he put on his clothes—all of them, in multi-layers. I don't think he planned that. He improvised. (If he had planned, he probably would have taken hangers with him.) *Improvisation is not only necessary at times; it can also add zest to life.*

Some people depend upon their *Daily Planners*. It's a virtue to plan. However, when we feel stuck, without a plan, we actually face a grand opportunity to consult our *Daily Improvisers*, to be a creative problem solver in the moment. Rather than panicking, we can remind ourselves of the words of the Flamenco dancer: **we can't make a mistake if we don't know what we're going to do.** And the advice of Jesus ... **don't worry, if we don't know what to do, the Spirit will help us when the time comes.**

ⁱ Irvine Barclay Theatre, "Sin Fronteras," (Without Borders) Savion Glover, Yaelisa, Jason McGuire & Sons de Jerez, 8 p.m. August 8 & 9, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Evidently Flamenco was originally something that people did in the streets, on street corners, just like hip-hop and jazz. The tap dancer of this improvising duo explained, "And the streets are always changing. If it comes from the streets, change is the only thing that's consistent."