

## Standing on Tiptoe

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Start with a cage with five monkeys. Inside the cage, put a bunch of bananas on top of a ladder. Soon, a monkey will start to climb the ladder to get the banana. As soon as he touches the ladder, spray all of the other monkeys with cold water. After a while, another monkey makes an attempt with the same result - all the other monkeys are sprayed with cold water. Pretty soon, when another monkey tries to climb the stairs, the other monkeys will try to prevent it.

Now, put away the cold water. Replace one monkey from the cage with a new one. The new monkey sees the banana and heads for the ladder. To his surprise and horror, all of the other monkeys attack him. After another attempt and attack, he knows that if he tries to climb the stairs, he will be assaulted.

Now, replace another of the original monkeys with a new one. The newcomer goes to the ladder and is attacked. The previous newcomer takes part in the punishment with enthusiasm! Likewise, replace a third original monkey, then a fourth, then the fifth. Every time the new monkey moves to the ladder, he is attacked. Most of the monkeys that are beating him have no idea why.

After replacing all the original monkeys, none of the new monkeys have ever been sprayed with cold water. They know nothing about cold water; nevertheless, no monkey ever again approaches the ladder to try for the banana.

Why? Because as far as they know, "That's the way we've always done it".

The past few generations have been rough on the church—and on those individual Christians who have put forth the effort to keep the gears meshed and the wheels turning. What keeps them engaged is a vision, or in some cases a memory. They have "seen through a glass dimly"—have caught a glimpse of what God can do with a people who place themselves in position to be led and blessed.

When the Spirit of God moves among a people who are ready to be led there is a sense of anticipation. Paul puts it this way in **ROMANS 8:19 (NRSV)** "*For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.*" I particularly like the wording of the J.B. Phillips New Testament: "*The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own.*"

It's exciting when people become aware that God is moving among them. That sense of anticipation—that "eager longing" grows into a hunger for what might be. Strengthened with that vision, even the hard times seem more manageable, because they're seen as part of a birthing process—the labor pains of God's ongoing, never-ending act of creation. As the writer of Revelation puts it, God is "always making all things new." Maybe it will happen again.

How might it happen again? Look with me at two stories from Scripture. In the first story Nehemiah is leading the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, when a delegation brings him a complaint. There was drought and some of the Israelites

were having to mortgage their homes and their vineyards to buy food. Those who were lending were charging exorbitant interest. We pick up the story in 5:6:

<p>NEHEMIAH 5:6-13 (NRSV) <i>I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. <sup>7</sup>After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, “You are all taking interest from your own people.” And I called a great assembly to deal with them, <sup>8</sup>and said to them, “As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!” They were silent, and could not find a word to say. <sup>9</sup>So I said, “The</i></p>	<p><i>thing that you are doing is not good. ... Let us stop this taking of interest. <sup>11</sup>Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.” <sup>12</sup>Then they said, “We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say.” And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised. ... And all the assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.</i></p>
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This is difficult for us to comprehend. How could humans—and especially people of faith—treat each other like that? How can we get inside this text?

Can you spell “Enron?” or “Bear Stearns?” Late in 2008, when major banks were failing and home mortgage defaults were reaching epidemic proportions and people talking about bread lines, I recall reading that the CEO’s of the top nine banks that failed—mind you, *the ones that failed*—had received \$167M in bonuses—not salaries; bonuses. The reward for failure; and it was all legal.

The ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* presented three ethical stances: (1) I have harmed the widow; (2) I have not harmed the widow; (3) I have helped the widow. The nine CEOs of those failed banks could say, “I have not harmed the widow. I did nothing illegal!” But for Nehemiah that wasn’t enough.

It wasn’t enough for Jesus, either. Jesus reserved his strongest condemnation for those who mistreated the poor—especially widows.

It’s striking that the sacred writings of every religion contain a “Golden Rule.” All but one state it this way: “Don’t do anything to anyone you wouldn’t want them doing to you.” Only Jesus states it positively: “DO unto others, as you would have them do unto you.” It reflects that third ethical stance of the Egyptian Book of the Dead: “I have helped the widow.”

We can identify with Nehemiah’s anger: *we’re* angry about the impact of dishonesty on our national economy and even on our own pocketbooks; but a deeper connection relates to the sense of community that is disregarded when people treat others that way.

Wild horses under attack by wolves or other predators will circle, facing inward and kicking outward. Wild donkeys under attack will face outward, each one concerned to defend himself, and consequently they end up kicking each other.

What an illustration! It's just not enough not to hurt each other. Community is formed when we help and support and encourage each other.

So, here is the second story, in contrast to what Nehemiah confronted:

**ACTS 4:32-35 (NRSV)** *Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. <sup>33</sup>With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all <sup>34</sup>There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. <sup>35</sup>They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.*

Does that sound appealing? Would you like to be involved in something like that? "*There was not a needy person among them.*" Now, I see red lights flashing on your dashboard; so let's take a look at what this is not:

- It's not a cult in which everything goes for the "*common good*"; but in reality "*common good*" begins with the "*Leader of the Pack*".
- It's not a "program" with a DVD, a leader's guide and a participant workbook.
- It's not socialism, because it's not mandated or controlled by government.
- For the same reason it's not welfare.

In fact, there's no bureaucracy involved at all—it didn't get referred to a committee and then have two readings before the board and finally (after three or four months) get voted on by the board.

So, if this is what it isn't...then what is it? And, how could it possibly work: ...without organizational structure? ...without budgets? ...without oversight by any board or committee? Where's the control? Where's the accountability?

It is nothing less than the finished product of the work of the Holy Spirit. "*The whole congregation of believers was of one heart and soul.*" Thank God there were no church boards to inhibit incentive and creativity back then! The Spirit empowered their initiative and released it.

That's why it worked. It came from the heart and soul of people who had discerned the presence of the Holy Spirit, and had let the Spirit lead them. As a result, they were transformed from the inside out.

But, it is interesting to note that the first organized effort of the Church was the election of deacons, who were charged with the distribution food—to widows. And the world stood on tiptoe to watch.