

Garden or Circus: Christian Care in the Face of Contemporary Pressures
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Introduction

In recent months as media pundits have called the U.S. “a nation divided,” I have found myself pondering Abraham Lincoln’s plea to Americans to remember “the better angels of our nature”¹. He issued this plea at the end of his first inaugural address in March of 1861 as the Civil War loomed on the horizon. Lincoln called us to awaken our moral and spiritual selves, instead of acting out of fearful self-interest.

Traveling internationally as an American on September 11th I am aware of the threats that hover on the horizon today. There’s a special Homeland Security surcharge, all people telegraph high alert, worrying that lesser angels—or worse—may get the upper hand.

The U.S. is currently engaged in an overseas military war, a domestic presidential battle, and a fierce debate over mounting economic debt. Conflict streams through the media into our homes. It is a spectacle, and we, the spectators. Bombarded by information about possible dangers, we register fears we can neither predict, control, nor objectively assess. In the midst of concerns for our own wellbeing, many American Christians are wondering how we, as a people, will “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with [our] God?”²

Signs and Sounds of Stress

Americans often respond generously, with courage, compassion, faith, hope, and love. At other times we lose touch with those “better angels” and respond out of our less angelic natures.

Two Tempting Responses to Stress

These days our less faithful selves manifest stress in two ways characteristic of our culture:

- 1) Frenetic activity (overwork, multi-tasking in its varied and accelerating manifestations, and imagined competitive engagement like aggressive driving, exercising, and dieting)
- 2) Mind-numbing disengagement (indulging in alcohol, overeating, surfing television channels or the internet, seeking relief through drugs/medication, vicariously living through celebrities, roaming shopping malls, and other dissipating activities)

¹ *First Inaugural*, 4 March 1861.

² Micah 6:8.

Many now work long days that include commuting to the workplace. Tired from the day, people spend evenings watching television, which offers round-the-clock news, dramatic stories about professionals in pressured work environments (hospitals, law offices, and even a funeral home and the White House), and the incredibly popular “reality” shows that feature real people aggressively and competitively facing extreme challenges. The day gets divided between work and disengaged entertainment—both responses anaesthetizing us, while exacerbating the prevalent disorders of attention and attachment marking our culture. Competitive activity fragments attention and fosters opportunistic relationships, while numbing disengagement blurs attention and draws one toward false relationships at the expense of real ones. Alternating between the two responses, we can feel crowded, yet alone.

As a Christian, sociologist, spiritual director, and executive director of a ministry dedicated to helping people integrate their Christian faith with their daily lives, I care about what it means to be a Christian in today’s world. As I flew on the 9-11 anxiety-saturated transatlantic flight thinking about the world passing beneath the plane, I remembered T.S. Eliot’s depiction of the crisis of his time, England between the world wars some eighty years ago. He called it a “wasteland.”³ The turn away from faith had rendered the world barren and dry.

Eliot lived in a society gradually losing and despising faith, a culture in which disaffection and despair were common and, in his intellectual circles, fashionable. Twenty years later as England was engaged in the Second World War, T.S. Eliot, by then a professing Catholic, published magnificent faith-filled poems, *The Four Quartets* (1943). The poems avowed that eyes of faith see a garden, “the spectre of a Rose,” the possibility of flourishing.⁴

I believe a metaphor other than wasteland is needed to describe how we experience today’s world when we turn from faith in God, and I propose the metaphor of circus. All the aspects of modern life that shrink the globe—mass communications, population growth, globalization, urbanization, cultural contagion and homogenization—render the world more a circus than a wasteland. Certainly there are those whose experience is that “the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,/And the dry stone no sound of water.”⁵ However, for many the experience is noisier and more chaotic. As experience shapes language, so language, conversely, shapes experience.

Around the world electronic and print media spread news that incites worry and advertisements that entice us to compete for, consume, and desire the same array of soon-obsolete goods. Last summer my twenty-year old son was sent to the Tuva region of Russia on a service project. He was the first American most of the people there had met, yet while there he saw a Tuvan teenager wearing a Michael Jordan jersey and a poster of

³ *The Waste Land* (1922) in *Collected Poems: 1909-1935* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930) 67-90.

⁴ (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1943).

⁵ *The Waste Land*, 1.23

Britney Spears, selling Pepsi-Cola, passed by on the side of a bus. The landscape may be dry under the compressed clutter, but the parched landscape seldom comes into view.

Circus Talk

The metaphor resonates with me. For twenty years I was a working parent and thought in terms of balancing and juggling the demands of different spheres of life. The danger for us who hold faith in God is that the circus enters our hearts, and we respond to its loud demands instead of listening for the One who call us by name, and loves us. Eavesdrop with me on the voices I hear around me in the U.S. as they speak the language of circus:

“I can’t keep up. It feels like life is passing me by. I need to pedal faster.”

“I need a better work-life balance. I’m juggling so many things that I keep dropping the balls.”

“He’s a star, a high-flyer. He rocketed to the top fast. I hope he doesn’t crash and burn.”

“I want to be a player, score, catch the gold ring.”

“I feel anaesthetized. I need to get out of Dodge so I can know who I am again, and be able to hear God.”

“She’ll be okay. She’s working with a net. Her husband’s in the big leagues and so long as she keeps her meds. up, she’s fine.”

“I jumped through too many hoops today at work. I’ve hit the wall. Let’s veg. out.”

“I feel like a slug, a slacker. I’m sleeping my life away. I need to get my life on track.”

“I have no life, no time for me. I get to work in the dark having dropped the baby at day-care, try to catch the balls thrown at me all day, then pick up the baby and arrive home in the dark again. I don’t see my garden in daylight during the week.”

This is the American “soul in paraphrase,” the cry of our hearts.⁶ The language privileged by today’s media and embedded in the American psyche employs metaphors of racing, launching, compressing, competing, and winning, or the antithetical vocabulary of vacating, narcotizing, idling, and mellowing. If, as Karl Rahner claimed at the end of World War II, the German heart was “rubbled over” like its cities, so the American soul today is “tumbling-over” kaleidoscopically.⁷ It feels its best when it’s acrobatic, adeptly vaulting from one challenge to the next; its worst, when caffeinated, running on fumes, alternating between the fast track and mindless refueling stops, never coming to a place of rest and restoration.

This is true in the church and out of it. My pastor recently told me of archiving ten thousand e-mails from the previous six months and needing to clear fifty unheard voicemails that day. Websites offer E-devotionals, for meditation-on-the-run. Clients arrive in my office for spiritual direction and line up on my desk their cell phones, pagers,

⁶ George Herbert, *Prayer I* in *The Temple: The Poetry of George Herbert*, ed. by Henry L. Carrigan, Jr. (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2001 [1633]) 45.

⁷ Karl Rahner, *The Need and Blessing of Prayer*, translated by Bruce W. Gillette (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997) 3.

and electronic calendars. Bumper stickers caution: “Jesus is coming. Look busy.” Confession: While editing this paper I sat in the lobby of my gym. To my great surprise (and dismay), a client walked past, and said, “Hi, Susan. Always working.”

Whether the human condition manifests as the dry wasteland of despair or the distracting cacophony of the circus, I believe Eliot is right in calling us to the garden. It is the watered landscape we Christians are invited to see, cultivate, and share. I will sketch out the metaphor of circus, then return to an extended consideration of the garden. Both concepts are used metaphorically to shed light on contemporary discipleship (no analysis or condemnation of actual circuses is intended).

Life under the Big Top

American public life can manifest as a three-ring circus, diverting, produced, and insulated beneath the Big Top. The acts currently featured in our three rings are: The War, The Economy, and The Race (presidential). As the ringmaster and spotlights shift the focus, media representatives rush from ring to ring on the hippodrome track encircling the three rings, their presence ensuring the circus will be broadcast and the Big Top extended into private homes.

A Word about the Circus

Most spectators sit in the grandstands—crowded and precarious—while the few rate exclusive box seats. All are subject to the drama of death-defying high-wire acts, heroes taming wild animals, trick riders, tumblers, clowns, and human cannonballs. Power is exerted, and nature, defied. Brass bands play marches, feeding the emotional frenzy and concessionaires (called “butchers” in circus argot) ply the stands with cotton candy, balloons, and Cracker Jack. Heat and odors, noise and action mingle in this environment of sensory overload.

Circuses are ancient. The first we know of were Etruscan, dating from the 6th c. BCE. Rome’s Circus Maximus was famous throughout the world for chariot races and bloody, often mortal, combat. Writing in the first century after Christ, the Roman writer Juvenal cast a critical eye on the circus: “For the people—who once conferred *imperium*, symbols of office, legions, everything—now hold themselves in check and anxiously desire only two things, the grain dole and chariot races in the Circus.”⁸ The universal human affliction, anxiety, plagues Psalmists, Romans, and Americans alike. From Juvenal came the expression *panem et circenses*. Bread and circuses, the opiates of the Roman masses. Americans, after the War of 1812, were the first to develop tented, mobile circuses, and, in my opinion, extended the modification to in-home television channel-surfing in later centuries.

Converts to the new-born religion of Christianity were appalled by the Roman public spectacles, seeing them as expressing devotion to pagan gods as well as occasions of drunken brutality. Gibbon wrote, “The Christian... with pious horror avoided the

⁸ Cited by www.vroma.org as from Juvenal’s *Satires*, 10.77-81. The information about circuses, unless otherwise indicated, comes from two websites: www.circusweb.com and www.vroma.org.

abomination of the circus [and] the theatre.”⁹ Before long the circus was turned against Christians in Rome when Nero scapegoated them for the fire of 65 CE that destroyed much of the city, and by later emperors and citizens who surmised that natural disasters and misfortunes befell Rome because Christians were unwilling to worship and appease the gods.¹⁰ Seemingly the gods had not been appeased, so the people looked to circuses for their own appeasement.

Who We Are at the Circus

The circus foments mass hysteria. Its producers prod emotions to the brink of complete disinhibition, building suspense and agitation to the climactic moment when appetites are sated by near-death survival or, as in the case with first century Christians in Rome, actual death. There is always the possibility that the crowd’s high spirits will topple into violence. Guards—Praetorian, police, or private security varieties—patrol circuses. The basic ingredients for mob violence are all present at the circus: incitement to frenzy, antagonistic contenders, crowds of people in close contact, and anonymity (we can witness such conditions in wars, rugby games, neighborhood rumbles, and prison riots). The anonymity is multifold: Contenders are costumed and caricatured, and the crowd in which we sit gazes ahead without eye contact. Moreover, we become anonymous to ourselves, our identity submerged in raw emotion and roiling humanity. In such circumstances people might anticipate and, occasionally, experience brutal drama.

In what ways are we tempted to be spectators at the circus of our own historical moment? I limit my view to the contemporary pressures affecting Americans, hoping you will find some broader relevance. What people experience as stresses, while often having objective validation, are shaped in large part by expectations and the gap between the real and the wished for. Once a wish is realized it is soon forgotten, and the next wish takes its place on an endless “hedonic treadmill.” On the whole, Americans do not feel happy because they have indoor plumbing, are not exposed to war in our backyards, and live in a land of overall longevity and health. Numerous studies show, sadly, that increased affluence, above a basic level, does not increase happiness. (This is referred to as the Easterlin Paradox after the economic historian Richard Easterlin, who, in the 1970s, first documented this phenomenon.) Americans have become twice as rich over a period of thirty years, but no more happy with growing affluence.¹¹

Human beings spend little time experiencing gratitude. Rather, we spend an estimated eighty percent of the time thinking about problems and concerns.¹² We also register loss more profoundly than gain, and hold disappointments longer and more closely than satisfactions. These are aspects of human nature that circus-thinking encourages. Today in the U.S. the featured shows under the Big Top—The War, The

⁹ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. by Antony Lentin and Brian Norman (Ware, England: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1998) 264-5.

¹⁰ Gibbon, 326 and 334.

¹¹ David G. Myers, “The Funds, Friends, and Faith of Happy People,” *American Psychologist* 55(1) (January 2000): 56-67.

¹² Frederic Luskin, “Thinking about Forgiveness in Coping with Serious Illness,” lecture at Stanford University, Menlo Park, California, videotape, 9 March 2000.

Economy, and The Race—stimulate anxious concern over real and imagined threats to our wellbeing.

A Circus Performer's Affliction: Fear of Falling

My sociologist colleagues take readings of the stress Americans bear. We are the most prosperous nation on earth, what some bitingly call the “super-duper power,” perhaps the Greatest Show on Earth. Yet external and domestic threats have cultivated terror. Barbara Ehrenreich has written about the middle-class’s “fear of falling.” We try to remain on the high wire and hold the flying trapeze, but in the past thirty years social changes have given many in the U.S. the experience of falling. I will mention three significant changes:

1) A Higher Wire and Harder Fall: The gap between wealthy and poor yawns ever wider, as middle class wage insecurity rises. In 1973 the wealthiest twenty percent of households accounted for forty-four percent of total U.S. income. By 2002 their share had jumped to fifty percent, while everyone else’s share fell.¹³ While poverty is growing, the poor are being criminalized (“welfare mother” is an accusatory label) and the wealthy valorized. The welfare system has been downsized, while the racist, classist penal system has mushroomed, now, the fifth largest employer in the U.S.¹⁴

2) Pedaling and Juggling Faster: Our lives divide between work and passive media consumption: As of the past few years, Americans now have the longest work year of all industrial nations (we work 49 ½ weeks a year; Japanese: 46; British: 43; Germans: 37).¹⁵ (Circus workers, on the average, work eleven straight months without a day off, and then take a few weeks off at Christmastime.) Tired workers turn to passive leisure activities (passivities?).

3) Working with a Frayed Net: The fabric of care has eroded: Most mothers of young children are now in the workforce; kin solidarity has been undermined by work imperatives (e.g., mobility, full-time work, length of work-year); we have suffered a social recession of civic life; and only 37% of U.S. firms provided full health coverage in the early 1990s compared with 72% in 1975.¹⁶ A front-page newspaper headline two weeks ago screamed, “Uninsured ranks hit record high.”¹⁷ Only the extremely successful high-flyers confidently work without a net.

Life in the Garden

It is easy to be enticed into the Big Top. It’s popular and mesmerizing. To turn from it is to resist its siren call and the stampede it incites. New College Berkeley and

¹³ Associated Press, “Income Gap of Poor, Rich, Widens,” Washington, D.C., 16 August 2004, www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/08/13/national/main635936.shtml.

¹⁴ Presentation by Loic Wacquant, University of California, Berkeley’s Center for Working Families, 19 April 1999; published in L. Wacquant, *Les Prisons de la Misere* (1999).

¹⁵ Steven Greenhouse, “Report Show Americans Have More ‘Labor Days,’” *New York Times* (1 September 2001).

¹⁶ Richard Freeman, *Working Under Different Rules* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press, 1994).

¹⁷ Victoria Colliver, *San Francisco Chronicle* (27 August 2004) A1

Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, in many different ways, are committed to help people turn away from the Big Top and toward God. It is also what I hope to help people do as I listen to them in spiritual direction. It is in turning toward God that we find the landscape neither compressed and cluttered, nor dry.

The Bible abounds with gardens—the garden of Eden, the heavenly city of Revelation 21 in which the tree of life grows, the garden of John 15 in which Jesus is the vine from whom we receive nourishment, the righteous ones of Psalm 1 who are like trees planted by streams of water and bear fruit. There are many aspects to the garden that counter the circus. I will focus on what I view as a garden spirituality (spirituality being how we understand and live our faith).

Planted and Accompanied

One of the more poetic and theologically rich expressions of garden imagery is found in Jeremiah 17: 7-8:

Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,
whose trust is the LORD.
They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.
It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

We are planted by streams of water, the same living water Jesus offered the Samaritan woman.¹⁸ Scripture entreats us to sink our roots into these streams, intentionally extend ourselves toward that which nourishes our core and guards us from heat and drought, so that we may not fear or be anxious as we continue to bear fruit. This is not a passive soaking up of the sun's rays. Trees are actively water-seeking, heliotropic, and fecund. This is the call to the Christian and to the Church. God is the living water sustaining all.

We are not alone in the garden. We did not create the garden, nor do we tend it by ourselves. Life is not a production we manufacture or an illusion we generate. God has created the garden, and, therefore, living well requires us to discover and conform ourselves to what is real and true, which presumes relationship with the divine Gardener. On the outskirts of the garden lies the wilderness, the land that is uncultivated. We have chosen formation. Trees orient themselves toward what nourishes them and enables them to bear fruit. Similarly, we choose the nurture, pruning, shaping, and blessing of the Gardener.

As God is with us in the garden, so are other people. Variety and interdependence constitute a garden. The garden is an open system: Streams flow into the garden, and the garden bears fruit for the world. There is no Big Top to seal off the world from the God “in whom we live and move and have our being,”¹⁹ or the neighbors we are to love, or the strangers we are to welcome.

¹⁸ John 4.

¹⁹ Acts 17:28.

When we see the garden and ourselves planted like trees, there is no false compartmentalization between love of God, self, and other. The streams of God's water nourish us—all of us—and, so, fruit grows, benefiting others. Emmanuel Levinas in contemporary philosophical language expresses this by writing that “the idea of the Infinite is to be found in my responsibility to the Other.”²⁰ It is not a matter of rational calculation or heroic action: The grace of God is received and does its transforming work in us and through us. Our mission in the world is the natural fruit of the streams of living water that flow through us, forming and transforming us, and extending transformation outward.

During World War II when many experienced a wasteland, there were those who cultivated gardens. One such place was the village of Le Chambon in southern France. Over the course of two dangerous years, the few thousand Chambonnais, mostly farmers, saved an equal number of Jews fleeing Nazi Germany and Vichy France. Most of the villagers were Protestant Christians who worshiped together and remembered stories of their Huguenot ancestors being persecuted for nearly three hundred years (the 16th through late 18th c.) in Catholic France. Like their ancestors they drew strength from time-tested biblical convictions, seeing no discontinuity between spirituality and engagement in the world.

When researchers in the 1970s learned about what had happened in Le Chambon and began to interview the remaining villagers, the Chambonnais offered no theories or justifications for what they did. They were surprised to be interviewed, shrugged their shoulders, and made comments similar to these: “I did what anyone would have done. They were people and they were being persecuted. They were the poor the Bible tells us to help. Where else could they go? I had to take them in.”²¹ The Chambonnais inhabited a garden, not a circus, so, unselfconsciously and communally, their watered roots fed canopies that became shelters for the poor. They worshiped and studied Scripture together, and, then, not really knowing what each other was doing for the refugees, worked interdependently from the deep wells of their faith.

The living water that flowed through these people continues to touch the world. When people read their story, hearts open. The Jewish sociologist who wrote the book about them was drawn to the subject when he found himself crying over the first account he read of what they did. He yearned for realistic hope in a world that seemed so brutal and indifferent. He thought perhaps he had found “the secret of redemption” in the goodness that happened in Le Chambon.²² As with the tree of life, the leaves of the trees that are the Chambonnais, offer hope, and in small, but robust ways, bring “healing of the nations.”²³

²⁰ “Beyond Intentionality,” in *Philosophy in France Today*, edited by Alan Montefiore (Cambridge University Press, 1983) 113.

²¹ See Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).

²² Hallie, 7.

²³ Revelation 21:2.

Who We Are in the Garden: I. Attention

In a circus, the action under the Big Top is orchestrated by the ringmaster who blows a whistle and snaps a whip. Other people are performers, spectators, concessionaires, and security guards. Outside the Big Top lies the midway, occupied, traditionally, by caged animals and freaks. No where in the circus is there true encounter. This is a world devoid of attending and tending (by this I refer to the performance of circus. I have read that in actual circuses animals and people are tended to, and, in fact, circuses form a traveling extended family).

In the garden we realize we are tended by the creator and sustainer Gardener who declares, “[Y]ou are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.”²⁴ We are seen, loved, and cared for by God. Our flourishing flows into our service as under-gardeners. This is caring work, not performance, and attention, not detached observation. Simone Weil wrote, “Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance; the love of our neighbor, which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance.”²⁵ This is the flow of grace. This is contemplative, not kaleidoscopic.

It is our responsibility to ensure that our churches are gardens, not circuses. As mega-churches proliferate in the U.S., the church becomes increasingly a matter of performance for spectators, programs for consumers, and a profusion of activities that distracts from prayerful and loving attention to God, self, others, and the stranger. T.S. Eliot in *Choruses from “The Rock”* (1934) warns of the time when those from the House of God will “walk in the street proudnecked, like thoroughbreds ready for races./Adorning themselves, and busy in the market, the forum,/and all other secular meetings./Thinking good of themselves, ready for any festivity./Doing themselves very well.”²⁶ Have we become proud and insular, busily inattentive to the world around us?

In the garden there are no proudnecked thoroughbreds. Diversity is welcome, and those who suffer are tended. The earth moves through its seasons, some are born and others die. God came to us in the garden as Jesus of Nazareth, not Superman. He, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,”²⁷ humbled himself to the point of death that we “may have life, and have it abundantly.”²⁸ These are words of the garden: life, abundance, humility (related to *humus*, the earth), and death. The ultimate gardens in Jesus’ life were Gethsemene and that of his tomb. Abundance includes blood, sweat, and tears.

In the garden we attend. We notice shapes, fragrances, breezes, and textures. Plants are helped to thrive. When we are performers or spectators, the quality of our attention is limited. In the garden attention expands. We are fully present to what and

²⁴ Isaiah 43:4.

²⁵ (“Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies,” in *The Simone Weil Reader*, edited by George A. Panichas (David McKay Company, Inc., 1977) 51.

²⁶ In *Collected Poems*, Section IX, 205.

²⁷ Philippians 2:6.

²⁸ John 10:10.

who we encounter. Our senses are engaged, not flooded by the smell of the greasepaint and roar of the crowd.

Jesus' final garden appearance illustrates the attention called for in the garden. In John 20, the story of Mary Magdalene's arrival at Jesus' tomb guides us, ever deeper, through levels of attention. She arrives and sees the stone that was rolled away (v.1). The word for see here is *blepo*, to have bodily vision. She sees the stone, and runs to tell the others about it. After the men had examined the inside of the empty tomb, Mary, alone, enters it. There she beholds two angels (v. 12). The word here is *theoreo*, to be a spectator surveying the details. She sees, surveys, the angels. They, in turn, attend to her weeping. Then she turns and sees Jesus, who also attends to her weeping, and calls her by name. Mary's deepening attention culminates in verse 18 when she tells the disciples she has seen, *orao*, the Lord. She has seen and understood, grasped the meaning. She knows the gardener is Jesus.

Who We Are in the Garden: 2. Care

Under the Big Top humility is anathema and imperfections shunned. There are no seasons, no aging, no disabilities. The seriously different are relegated to the freak show, which advertises such "human curiosities" as the Illustrated Man, the Mermaid Woman, the Two-Headed Baby, and the Dog-Faced Boy (all at the Coney Island Freak Show in New York). The circus would have us despise those who are different, if we see them at all, and shield our own differences from appraisal.

The garden is larger than the circus. The Christian religion invites us to "comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love that [we] may be filled with the fullness of God."²⁹ This magnitude of grace holds all, and enables us to encounter reality in its fullness. Our faith is distinctive in its commitment to those the world considers other-than-normal: the poor, bereft, sick, aged, marginalized, foreign, afflicted, and those who have fallen from the high wire. Jesus turned his attention to individuals in all these categories, engaging them in conversations, and elevating them to historical prominence.

From Scripture we hear more from Bartimaeus and the Samaritan woman at the well than we do from Herod (the contemporary ringmaster). Not only are the blind man and the marginalized foreign woman the subject of compassionate attention, they are full moral and spiritual agents, asked what they want, and responded to accordingly. This faith insists that the love of God in its broad, long, high, and deep capaciousness envelopes all of these, without regard to human evaluations of "most," "least," or "normal." As historical figures, the woman at the well and Bartimaeus stand as our teachers no less than the disciples. People are not relegated to exclusive categories, some being superstars while others are freaks, some giving care and others receiving it. We all need to receive and give care. Receiving care in no way diminishes the person, but, rather, true care blesses the giver and the receiver.

²⁹ Ephesians 3: 18-19.

Jesus' stance toward the marginalized was revolutionary. People in these other-than-normal categories were not accorded full personhood in ancient times and classical literature. He walked through a garden, and taught us how to see and walk in it as well. Seeing the world as a garden is a conversion, not an evolutionary or developmental achievement. People in the 21st century slip into the circus world no less than those of the 1st century. Today, unlike biblical times, many afflictions the Bible describes may be averted or remedied through advances in sanitation, nutrition, medicine, technology, education, and human rights implementation. We have developed tremendous powers for understanding the world, creating rational systems of government, commerce, and social life, and harnessing nature for our wellbeing.

Yet we are plagued by the inexplicable and uncontrollable. Our accomplishments incline us to view disease, disaster, disability, and death as aberrations and, in large part, subject to our control. Failure to exert adequate control—through fast pedaling and juggling, better execution of performance, accurate balance, and proper net maintenance—may result in a fatal fall.

Though we may not send lepers to the outskirts of towns or put the disabled in side shows, we distance ourselves from what we see as flawed or failed. We do not want to fall. We use our minds to buffer us from suffering. Our tendency to make questions about abnormality and suffering abstract and theoretical has been exaggerated by our continuing successes in and reliance on technological solutions to all kinds of unwanted conditions. Much as we see aberrations as subject to our explanation and control, so, proudnecked and lonely, we see all our successes, health, and longevity as personal achievements.

People of faith may employ an additional strategy to distance ourselves from suffering. We develop theological arguments (theodicies) to explain suffering. While perhaps not describing God as a ringmaster, we create systems in which God functions as a divine judge or schoolmaster, impersonally meting out suffering to those who fail, steadfastly untouched by humanity's tears. This grants us the comforting illusion that we can protect ourselves from suffering if we learn the ropes, the moves, the right spiritual disciplines and techniques of discipleship. Like the ancient Romans we construct a circus to appease the gods. Anxiety, fear, and terror motivate the project. Such thinking depletes compassion, diverting our attention and care away from the one who is suffering. It expels us from the garden.

Unlike emperors, Jesus steps into the ring, and makes of it a garden. In John 8 Jesus is teaching at the temple. In part to test him and, perhaps trick him into committing a crime against the temple, people bring before him a woman caught in adultery. It's tense and adversarial, with a life on the line. Jesus slows the action by writing in the dirt. He doesn't respond at first. When he does, he casts the attention on the accusers, and the state of their souls. In particular he obliterates the anonymity of the crowd, by drawing attention to the one who would throw the first stone.

Then Jesus exits the circus again by bending over and focusing on a place on the ground, away from the conflict. After the people leave, one by one, Jesus stands up straight and addresses the woman as a person, not as a category. He speaks truth with compassion: does justice, shows kindness, and walks humbly with his Father.

The Call to Discipleship: Beyond Frenzy and Disengagement

In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus tells us, explicitly, how to see the garden through the circus that would engulf him. He says: “Stay awake, be watchful, pray.”³⁰

“Stay awake.”

All of us are tempted to freeze, fight, flee, work in a frenzied way, distract ourselves, or figure it out when we face threat and suffering. There are times when each of those responses is the helpful, adaptive one. In Gethsemane, we see Jesus stay awake, watch, and pray. He counters attempts to respond in other ways, and asks his disciples to “Stay awake” with him. Jesus challenges his disciples to stay with what is real, as he was doing, rather than with what is escapist, manufactured, or illusory.

“Be watchful.”

Jesus tells his friends he is sorrowful unto death. He is honest about wishing not to suffer and face the circumstances without pretense, costume, or dazzling heroics. The disciples might have preferred dare-devil stunts and escapist magic. Instead Jesus asks them to bear witness to the truth, and lets them know that their attention matters to him. So, too, we are challenged to be attentive, to notice all there is to notice in the garden. Gardens contain beauty and death, the effects of changing seasons, new life and decay, gardeners and sometimes predators. Perhaps there are terrorists, perhaps an angel, certainly a person who is suffering, and, we hope, “the better angels of our nature.” It is by being watchful that we can accompany Jesus and know what is loving and just to do.

“Pray.”

Jesus shows us what it looks like to turn to God in all circumstances. He prays when tempted, afflicted, tortured, and crucified. He prays when his prayers are not granted and God seems silent. Jesus has been down all the paths we travel in prayer. He understands the fear of falling, the temptation to pedal and juggle, and the problems of not working with a net of human construction. Even so, now and forevermore, he is the living water who turns the circus into the garden, as we “send out [our] roots by the stream” and “set [our] hearts to seek God.”³¹

³⁰ Luke 22:35-46, Mark 14:32-42, and Matthew 26:36-46.

³¹ Jeremiah 19:8, 2 Chronicles 30:19.