

“Improvising the Gospel like Richie Havens Improvised *Freedom*”  
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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

The most grueling summer for me during college was after my sophomore year. It was the first of several summers that I worked as a laborer for Cedar Cliff Construction in northern New Jersey. I was the “helper” for the boss and owner of the business - let’s call him “Bill.” The first job he assigned me was to dig a pitched trench, 30 feet long, starting at 24 inches deep near the house and ending in a six foot deep hole. He gave me a shovel, a post hole digger, and a tape measure, and then he left for another job at a different house. It was 8am in the morning, and the temperature was already climbing toward the upper ’90s with high humidity. “I hope you brought water,” he said as he drove away. Bill was the toughest boss I ever had. He swore like a sailor and he was merciless. I remember one day we were driving to a job in his truck and a Santana song came on the radio. A fan of late-’60s music, I steered the conversation toward the music of his generation, and asked Bill about Woodstock. “Were you there?” I made the mistake of asking. “You know where I was that summer?” he grunted. “Sitting in the [insert colorful language] mud in Vietnam.” Bill had been a platoon commander. He wouldn’t talk about it in any detail except to say that he couldn’t understand why Americans his age *chose* to sit in mud in upstate New York in August of 1969 when his platoon had been *ordered* to do it. “But,” Bill was quick to add, “we,” meaning he and his fellow soldiers - in his words - “completely supported *those* hippies.”

This month is the 50th anniversary of Woodstock. The other night our family watched the PBS American Experience special “Woodstock: Three Days That Defined a Generation,”<sup>1</sup> and I learned a few new things about the festival on Max Yasgur’s farm in Bethel, NY. I learned that the whole festival was the product of improvisation. The four founders of the festival originally intended to build a recording studio in Woodstock, but, in a meeting in early 1969, their idea morphed *from* building a studio *to* building a studio with a big opening concert *to* scrapping the studio plan and just hosting a giant concert instead. The four also improvised on the venue for the concert when the zoning board of Wallkill, NY - the original site - banned the festival just four weeks before it was set to begin, because the planned portable toilets wouldn’t meet town code. After work delays on the new site at Yasgur’s farm, festival organizers were faced with a dilemma: there wasn’t time to build *both* the fences around the venue *and* the stage; so they could either offer the concert free of charge, meaning they would probably go bankrupt, or build the fences and charge admission but have no stage for the bands to play on. They built the stage and gave a free concert to more than 400,000 people - twice the number than was expected. One of those concert-goers captured the improvisational mood of the time, when she said, “We did not plan ahead, we did not plan where we were going to stay, we didn’t think about food. It was just like, hey, this sounds like fun. Let’s get in the car and go.” The 3-day concert itself was also an exercise in improvisation. Too many cars on nearby highways meant that bands had to be helicoptered in. And the rain delays and the traffic meant the order of bands who performed was also improvised. Richie Havens was slated to perform fifth on the first day. When he arrived, concert organizers said, “you’ve got to on stage now, man. We’ve got no one else to play.”

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/woodstock/#film\\_description](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/woodstock/#film_description)

So, Havens performed first; and because the other bands were late, he stayed on stage for nearly three hours. In a 1990 interview, Havens remembered that Woodstock was - in his words - “absolutely crazy . . . . I was supposed to be fifth on the bill and here I am going up first. The concert was three hours late and I’m thinking [the crowd is] going to throw beer cans at me. I was onstage for three hours. . . . [And] I did about nine or ten encores, because I thought I was finished, went off, and they didn’t have anyone to go on behind me, so I had to go back out again.”<sup>2</sup> The last song he performed was the one that made him famous - *Freedom*. It was completely improvised on stage. ““When you hear me play that long intro [to the song],” said Havens, ““it’s me stalling. I was thinking, “What . . . am I going to sing? I think the word “freedom” came out of my mouth because I saw it in front of me. I saw the freedom that we were looking for. And every person was sharing it, and so that word came out.”””<sup>3</sup>

What strikes me as interesting about today’s gospel reading is how Jesus seems to be improvising on the spot. As Luke the gospel writer tells the story, Jesus was teaching one day in a synagogue - good rabbi that he was. And as he was teaching, he noticed a woman who was afflicted with a terrible illness. He called her over - it’s implied in the text that this happened right in front of the whole congregation during the service. Jesus then placed his hands on her and he set her free. “You are set free from your ailment,” he said. *Freedom*. The whole scene oozes improvisation, a spur-of-the-moment change of plans - a change in the order of the Shabbat service itself. Those of us who’ve learned stories about Jesus aren’t surprised by this scene. Several times in the New Testament gospels Jesus improvises in this way to perform a healing on the Sabbath - the holiest day of the week in Judaism. Just in Luke’s gospel alone there are two other Sabbath healing stories. Both improvised healings. In one, Jesus halts a Sabbath service in a synagogue to call a man forward and restore his hand. In the other, Jesus interrupted a Sabbath dinner at the house of a respected member of the clergy to heal a man who suffered from fluid retention. And in today’s story, he pauses his teaching to set a woman free, also on a Sabbath. And in all three stories, other religious leaders who witnessed these wonders were furious. Why? Why was healing on a Sabbath a problem for some onlookers?

I’ll return to this question in a bit. But first I want to focus on the improvisation itself. A cursory reading of the gospels reveals that pretty much *every* healing story was an improvisation. In nearly every one of these stories, Jesus is living in the moment; he encounters someone in need; and he alters whatever other plans he had to show compassion. There are fourteen healing stories in Luke’s gospel. In one Jesus frees a man from convulsions, who happened to be nearby in a synagogue. In another he relieved someone’s fever after finding out that she was ill. In other stories, Jesus meets people in need as he travels: a man with a skin disease; three different men - two of them fathers - who pull Jesus aside and beg him to heal members of their household; he meets a mother who lost her child as he enters a city; he encounters an afflicted man who met him as he stepped out of a boat in a different region; he met a small crowd of people suffering from various ailments as he traveled to Jerusalem. In still other stories, his fame drew large crowds of people to him for healing, and he paused whatever else he was doing to meet their need. In fact, in *every* healing story in Luke’s gospel Jesus improvises on the spot - he changes whatever other plans

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/richie-havens/freedom>

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he had in order to offer help. No planning ahead. No scheduled *healing* meetings. Jesus was simply in a place or on the move when he met people who needed help, and he met the need.

It is interesting, though, to read in the gospels that some onlookers seethed with rage when Jesus healed on Sabbath days in particular. In today's story the synagogue leader himself criticized Jesus for setting the woman free on a Sabbath day. The Sabbath was supposed to be a day of rest. "Six days you shall work," says Jewish law, "but on the seventh [i.e., Saturday] you shall rest." It's a beautiful law - a law based on a principle that we all need rest: *at least* one day per week that's free from the rigmarole of life, a day to hike, or to visit a winery or a park, to sail or kayak or ski, or to watch Netflix or Hulu and order pizza and wings. Jesus was a pretty liberal first century Jew; and some from more conservative sects of first century Judaism observed stricter versions of Sabbath law than he did. It's the old fundamentalist vs. progressive divide that has always vexed world religions. Ancient Jews disagreed with each other over the proper *way* to keep the Sabbath. Some limited how far one could walk, since walking too far could become working, and the Sabbath day was to be a day of rest; others restricted how much one could carry from one house to another - carrying too much weight could become work; there were restrictions on cooking, restrictions on building fires; and there were some groups, like the community that lived in the desert at Qumran, who were stricter still and banned all mingling with non-Jews on the Sabbath. The synagogue leader in today's story, like other religious leaders who criticized Jesus, was a hardliner, believing that even healing was a form of work. He put religious doctrine ahead of caring for people when he said in today's reading, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day."

But Jesus lived by a different principle. His was more like, keep the law, yes, but bend it or even break it to help someone in need. The religion he lived channeled the spirit of today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah, which speaks of seeing divine light in the darkness; finding refreshment in parched places; feeling a gloom lifting and bones made strong; and enjoying springs of spiritual water rising from inside, when we, as Isaiah says, "meet the needs of the afflicted." It's a fundamental principle - a thread, a refreshing stream, a basic way of living - that puts people ahead of doctrine or ideology. Or, maybe a different way to phrase this is that helping people *is* right religious doctrine. "Jesus never commanded me to love my religion," writes Reverend Barbara Brown Taylor. "[So,]" she continues, "the only clear line I draw these days is this: when my religion tries to come between me and my neighbor, I will choose my neighbor."

Barbara Brown Taylor's words remind me of a talk delivered by scholar of religion Karen Armstrong about the principle of compassion that's found in every religious tradition.<sup>4</sup> In that talk Karen Armstrong speaks about the moment she left the convent where she had been a nun, saying, "[As] I look back on my life the last thing I ever wanted to do was write, or be in any way involved in religion. After I left my convent, I'd finished with religion," she says. "I thought that was it. And for 13 years I kept clear of it. I wanted to be an English literature professor. ... But then I suffered a series of career catastrophes, one after the other, and finally found myself in television. I said that to Bill Moyers, and he said, 'Oh, we [in television will] take anybody.' And I was doing some rather controversial religious programs," she goes on. "This went down very well in the U.K., where religion is extremely unpopular. And so, for once, for the only time in my life, I was finally in the mainstream.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/karen\\_armstrong\\_makes\\_her\\_ted\\_prize\\_wish\\_the\\_charter\\_for\\_compassion/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/karen_armstrong_makes_her_ted_prize_wish_the_charter_for_compassion/transcript)

But I got sent to Jerusalem to make a film about early Christianity. And there, for the first time, I encountered the other religious traditions: Judaism and Islam, the sister religions of Christianity. ... I knew nothing about these faiths at all - despite my own intensely religious background, I'd seen Judaism only as a kind of prelude to Christianity, and I knew nothing about Islam at all. But in that city, that tortured city, where you see the three faiths jostling so uneasily together, you also become aware of the profound connection between them. And it has been the study of other religious traditions that brought me back to a sense of what religion can be, and actually enabled me to look at my own faith in a different light. And [what] I found [as I studied these traditions,] ... astonish[ed] ... me. ... What I've found, across the board," she says, "is that religion is about [more than belief; it's about] behaving differently. ... Religious doctrines are meant to be summons to action; you only understand them when you put them into practice. ... And it is an arresting fact that right across the board, in every single one of the major world faiths, compassion - the ability to feel with the other ... - is not only the test of any true religiosity, it is also what will bring us into the presence of what Jews, Christians, and Muslims call 'God' or the 'Divine.' ... [W]hen we feel with the other, we dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and we put another person there. And once we get rid of ego, then we're ready to see the Divine."

Karen Armstrong goes on to tell a story about an ancient rabbi named Hillel, an older contemporary of Jesus. One day, "A pagan came to [Hillel] and offered to convert to Judaism if the rabbi could recite the whole of Jewish teaching while he stood on one leg. Hillel stood on one leg and said, 'That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the Torah [i.e., the law]. The rest is commentary. Go and study it.'" "The great Rabbi Meir," Armstrong continues, "said that any interpretation of Scripture which led to hatred and disdain, or contempt of other people - any people whatsoever - was illegitimate. Saint Augustine [one of Christianity's greatest theologians] made exactly the same point. Scripture, he [said], 'teaches nothing but charity, and we must not leave an interpretation of Scripture until we have found a compassionate interpretation of it.'" Religious traditions have insisted, Armstrong concludes, "that you cannot and must not confine your compassion to your own group: your own nation, your own co-religionists, your own fellow countrymen. You must have ... concern [and compassion] for everybody."

...It's a principle that Jesus modeled in his ministry of improvisation. And it's a principle that is especially relevant in our day. Amen.