

# The Climb

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Perhaps over these last few weeks you took some interest – or at least were aware – of a couple of rock climbers, Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgenson, who set out back on December 27<sup>th</sup> to attempt to be the first to free climb the straight vertical ascent of the Dawn Wall of the El Capitan mountain in Yosemite National Park. No one had ever been able with bare hands and no benefit of pull ropes to make it to the top. Ever. The ascent took nineteen days. Nineteen days which meant they had to sleep on the sheer cliff of this mountain. Which meant they had to hang tents on the side of the mountain and sleep suspended in mid-air. It meant many failed pitches from one point of the cliff face to another, which meant many slams of their bodies against the stone wall. Which meant bruises and abrasions and cuts and discouragement. But after seven years of preparing and nineteen days climbing they stepped foot on the summit and accomplished what many describe as the greatest ascent ever in the history of human ascending. To view this rock face it seems incomprehensible that any human being could ever come close – not to mention make it to the top. But they did. And they did because they tried. They took the first step.

Sometimes it's the first step that is the hardest step.

I am guessing that you and I have in each of our lives a few El Capitan's. I am guessing that you and I over the course of our days have looked ahead to some difficult or impossible journey – some insurmountable summit, some massive endeavor – and have wondered to ourselves not only whether it was possible, but whether it was even worth trying. Maybe it was some sort of physical challenge – running a marathon, climbing Kilimanjaro, swimming a mile, hiking the Appalachian Trail.

Such feats are probably the dream of only a few of us. But for the rest of us I suspect the difficult journeys have to do with what is going on in the inside. Journeys of the mind and journeys of the heart. I ran into a 70 year old man a while back who wondered to himself whether at that age if he could learn to speak French. He wasn't particularly good at languages – but maybe he could teach himself to speak French. Quite a climb. Some wonder about starting a business. Some dream about writing a book. Some imagine trying to make some difference in the world – feeding the hungry, putting a dent in human trafficking, teaching the disadvantaged, changing the spiral of poverty in Honduras. Quite a climb. Some look into their personal world and see some El Capitan's. Relationships that need scaling. Hurts that need healing. Sins that need forgiving. And the climb seems pretty steep, nearly impossible and standing at the base makes you wonder if it's even worth taking the first step up.

Whatever it might be, each of us harbors some sort of yearning to scale some sort of height.

Now when it comes to these El Capitan's of our lives the resistance over taking the first step has often to do just as much with us as it does with scale of the climb. Because I am guessing there is a part of all of us that has been convinced along the way of all the things we cannot do. The further you get along in life – the more loudly the voice gets in your head that insists that you are just not capable of taking on the climb. Too steep. Too difficult. Too comprehensive. Too expensive. Too complicated. Too dangerous. Too much for this little brain. Whatever it might be. And because we can't imagine tackling all of it – we never attempt the start of it.

What was that line from Eleanor Roosevelt: “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

Charles Schulz, the creator of the comic strip *Peanuts*, when reflecting on the genesis of Charlie Brown often referred back to his childhood – and his sense that his parents didn't believe in him. And he figured that they didn't believe in him because they didn't believe in themselves. Thinking about his mother, Schulz once said: She didn't go to PTA meetings because she did not feel

she was sophisticated enough to mingle with the other parents ... maybe because she went no further than the third grade ... she felt that she did not have the right type of clothes. ... it would have been wonderful if someone could have explained to my mother that she need not have felt inadequate." No surprise that *Peanuts* carried for fifty years the theme of inadequacy. Charlie Brown and his inadequacy. And no surprise that it became the most read comic strip in American history. We all have some sense of inadequacy.

And maybe more than anywhere else in our lives our sense of inadequacy reaches its highest level when it comes to our relationship with God. When it comes to the journey of the spirit. The life of being a disciple. Pews in every church are filled with people who look at the spiritual journey and wonder if the climb is too steep, the trail too long, the ascent too dangerous. And in thinking of all those things that God might desire of us – we consider the mountain and say it's not worth the first step.

And nowhere might we feel this greater than in the three chapters we find in Matthew that tradition calls *The Sermon on the Mount*. The Sermon on the Mount, found only in Matthew, is this 110 verse collection of Jesus' teaching – that to read it is to hear from Jesus of the El Capitan of the discipleship life. Verse after verse Jesus presents to us the height and depth and width of the spiritual journey. The pinnacle of the spiritual climb. The high bar of following Jesus. So high that once you read through the Sermon on the Mount one of your first feelings is the mountain is too high. Pick just a few verses: Jesus says, "If you say, "You fool," to your brother or sister, you will be liable to the hell of fire." "If you look at a woman with lust you have committed adultery with her in your heart." "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." "Love your enemy." "Do not judge." "Do not store up treasures on earth." "Don't be worried about tomorrow." Makes El Capitan look like a walk in the park! And what we might want to say to ourselves is, Why start? What's the point? I can't be all those things. I can't become this person Jesus wants me to be. "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect," Jesus says. Not going to happen, so why even try?

And maybe that's the reason why when Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount -- this El Capitan of the spiritual life -- he begins with these introductory statements about the blessed life that we call the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes -- these first twelve verses of the Sermon on the Mount where we discover about the blessed life. And what we discover about the blessed life is that it has very little to do with whether or not you get to the top -- and it has everything to do with whether you have started. The blessed life is about the journey to become children of God. Blessed are you if you start the climb. Because when you start climbing you start becoming. And if you start becoming -- here's what might happen:

- You might find that you lack in spirit -- but blessed are you for the climb is full of spirit and grace.
- You might find yourself grieving and mourning -- but blessed are you because the climb gets your heart breaking for the world.
- You might hunger and thirst for righteousness -- but blessed are you for the climb gets you hungering and thirsting for the right things.
- You might have to be merciful -- but blessed are you, because the climb of mercy will show you how much you need for yourself.
- You might have to bring peace to a frayed and tearing world -- but blessed are you because the climb of peacemaking brings to you a little peace for yourself.

But you see all of it comes in the climb. All of it comes when we stop standing and staring at the cliff and start the ascent.

"Costly grace," is what Bonhoeffer called it. Which is to say -- that if we would ever hope for this blessed life that God would promise us -- it comes not just in the accepting of the grace of Christ -- saying yes to Jesus' forgiveness -- but in saying yes to the climb. The setting out. Jesus invites us into the ascent -- with all its slips and falls and pitches and hanging in midair, and bumps and bruises and scratches -- but all that comes with the blessed life. It's not about the top, it's about the incredible climb!

Tommy Caldwell, one of those El Capitan climbers put it this way, "I came to the point a few years ago where I figured it was worth it whether we made it or not. I just loved the way that it made me live, so I decided to push forward as long as it kept making me feel that way. Actually doing it was really the icing on the cake."

It was worth it whether we made it or not – I just love the way it made me live.

A wonderful couple I know – whom I married almost twenty years ago – decided a few years back that they weren't getting any younger (they're around 40) and that on the top of their bucket list was bicycling together completely around the globe. So they decided that that was what they were going to do. And for several years they had to go through the arduous process of preparing to do this – which meant saving money, selling their house, buying equipment, mapping the course, etc.. And then came the day last April when they put foot to pedal ... and they started. They set out. They started from the state of Washington crossing North America, taking a ship across the ocean, and have gotten as far as Africa in those 9 months. Africa!!! And with those nine months and those miles – have come incredible stories of peril and adventure and life transforming experiences. A couple of weeks ago a family issue arose which meant that they had to store their bikes, pack up their stuff and come home. They don't know how long for and they don't know if they will be able to resume. But, as they said, it doesn't matter!!!! They got to Africa, for God's sake. And the way to get to Africa is to take the first pedal!

Thomas Merton, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century ascetic who gave up the urbane life to become a trappist monk, in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, while reflecting upon his decision to take those first steps, shares this prayer he made to God, "I was not sure," Merton prays, "where I was going, and I could not see what I would do when I got (there). But you saw further and clearer than I, and you opened the seas before my ship, whose track led me across the waters to a place I had never dreamed of, and which you were even then preparing to be my rescue and my shelter and my home ... How far have I to go to find You in Whom I have already arrived!"

How far I have to go to find You in whom I have already arrived.

And it all begins with the setting out. So what about it? What will that look like for you? To take the next step into the blessed life. To make your advance upon the great and holy mountain before you? To read those 110 ten verses of Jesus' great sermon – and pick just one thing and say – this is what I will do. What might that mean for this great church – if together we took our own next steps? At the beginning of another year, what light and salt we would be in the world if you and I started climbing. I mean climbing. Ascending. Living into the costly grace. Putting hands to the stone and pulling upward. Living into the blessed life – feeling the dangerous thrill of taking the chance. Rearranging your sedentary schedule. Redoing your comfortable budget. Expanding your sleepy mind. Putting to work your slow beating heart. Hungering, thirsting, peacemaking, mourning, giving mercy. Oh my Lord, there's no telling what might happen if we put foot to pedal – if we looked upward and stepped the first step. Scary, yes! Risky, yes! Uncertain, yes! Blessed? Yes, says Jesus. But will we?

Stephen Ambrose in his great book on Meriwether Lewis and the Lewis and Clark expedition quotes from Lewis' journal as he started into what he knew was going the most dangerous and uncertain journey of his life. Lewis writes in his journal: "We are now about to penetrate a country at least two thousand miles in width, on which the foot of civilized man has never trodden; the good or evil it has in store for us is for experiment yet to be determined. I can esteem this moment of my departure as among the most happy of my life."

Blessed are those who take the first step.