

Matthew 16:24 - 17:8

Last year a book by Tim Miller came out called *Why We Did It*. Tim Miller is a former Republican operative, and the book is the result of many interviews he did with former colleagues about how they came to the point of working for Donald Trump, whether directly or indirectly. Miller himself took a minute but landed sooner than most Republicans in the Never Trump camp, which is still a lonely place. Most professional Republicans were horrified by Trump but gradually came around to serving his interests, which is where they are to this day. As Jonathan Chait writes, "One motif of his subjects is a failure to summon the imagination and moral courage to break free from their career path and social identity. By the time you have attained a job in Republican politics that carries enough influence to matter, you have enough at stake professionally and socially that truly abandoning the party becomes as difficult to imagine as a fish leaving the water for land."ⁱ

These people have made all their friends, all their professional contacts, their whole Rolodexes, in the Republican world. As the party's fortunes became Trump's fortunes, individuals could either go along and hope for the best, or refuse to stand up for his bigotry and simple-mindedness and lose their careers, their social circles, the professional contacts that might get their kids an internship--all of it. So they went along, and colluded in the erosion of democracy that we are struggling against now.

Worse, to my mind, is the collusion of the evangelical establishment. I won't go into it all, because we all know too well the story of Christendom's self-abasement. But they of all people should have remembered Jesus' words to Peter in Matthew 16: ²⁵"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will

it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

Right before this story, Jesus had asked the disciples who they thought he was, and Peter had said that Jesus was the Messiah. So Peter *knew*. When Jesus said that he would have to suffer and die, Peter said, Surely not, [we'll protect you/we love you/that's not what Messiahs do], and Jesus' sharp retort was "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus was tempted by Peter's framing of the situation, as he had been tempted in the desert. He didn't want to die either, but he knew that sometimes, in the effort to save yourself, you lose your own soul. So today he just puts it flatly before the disciples, that his followers had better pick up the instruments of their own executions if they want to follow him.

And then he takes a few of them, including Peter, up the mountain.

Jesus didn't take everyone, but he took Peter, who had just energetically tried to deny that God's Messiah could possibly have to suffer and die in bringing in the kingdom. And what does Peter see on the mountain? Moses--the embodiment of Torah--and Elijah--the embodiment of the Prophets--standing with a shining, transfigured Jesus. The Law and the Prophets stand with Jesus. God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved . . . listen to him!" And Jesus tells his terrified disciples, "Get up and do not be afraid." Maybe Peter was brought up the mountain to see for one moment that what is going on is way bigger than he imagined, and that his protective response to Jesus is not necessary.

But why does Jesus say, "Do not be afraid"? Is he referring backward to the recent conversation in which he had admonished the disciples to be ready to die, to relinquish their lives if they wanted to live? Because that *is* terrifying. I get why Tim Miller's colleagues

rationalized their compromise with integrity, though I'm still appalled at them. They had bills to pay, relationships to nurture, an institution in which they had invested their futures. And I get why our evangelical sisters and brothers got on the Trump train. They wanted policy outcomes, sure, but they also want Christendom. They want institutional power for their kind of churches, such that their cultural values prevail in this country. They want members of their churches to be in government and at the helms of influential media companies. And in their eyes, the way to attain those goals is by amassing institutional power such that their views can be imposed on the rest of the public.

The church is in decline, maybe permanent decline. When most of us were young, it was an influential institution, and clergymen were respected, asked to write opinion pieces, consulted on issues of public opinion. I think we can grieve the decline of the church without being bigots; after all, churches have served and still serve a lot of important purposes, including providing community, the loss of which is impacting our mental health enormously. But it is declining, and outside of the evangelical community Christians have a pretty bad reputation. We have a bad reputation because of those efforts I just cited to retain power and influence. In trying to save the institution of Christendom, conservative Christians have just about killed the institutional church. In amassing coercive power, they have lost the life-giving power of the gospel.

Clinging to what we think will give us life can be exactly the way to hasten death. In our own context, we're all facing the ambiguous change that comes when I retire. And I don't have any specific wisdom to offer on that front except to say that if Jesus is to be believed, we shouldn't cling on to anything that keeps us from living the gospel. It's living the reality of the

kingdom that has always given us life: coming just as we are, accepting one another just as they are. Feeding the hungry with food and with conversation. Showing up for people. Listening. Learning. Praying. That's church, that's Crossroads, regardless of what else changes. It's the leading edge of the kingdom of God which is coming in its fullness.

Last week I had an impromptu conversation with another adjunct instructor named Katie who teaches Composition 1. She's just started teaching at Mitchellville [women's prison], which I'm scheduled to do in a year and a half, so I was really interested to hear what she thought. She loves it and also kind of hates it. We didn't get a chance to have a good conversation, but what she hates has to do with the restrictions on her students. They meet once a week in the evening, and they're not allowed internet access, so she doesn't hear from them all week. They're not allowed to take restroom breaks individually so she schedules one restroom break for everybody. It feels degrading to her, but that's prison. But then we started talking about how good it is to meet with students face to face, how we really would not want to teach online asynchronously, however much we're told it's the coming thing. And she started sort of zeroing in on what she loves about this class, which is that once a week these women come together in a little community and help each other get better at writing. (Which also means get better at thinking and wondering and becoming wise.) They're super-motivated. They want to be there.

Mitchellville Women's Prison is not a college, not a desirable destination, not a life-giving institution. And yet in that restrictive and degrading environment, almost an anti-college, I think Katie's class offers transfiguration and a foretaste of the kingdom. There is the gloriousness of growth and discovery and, via my friend Katie whom I happen to know is one of

those Catholics who think we're here to serve others, there is the loving gaze of God revealing the actual, usually-hidden gloriousness of each one of those students. Letting go of what college should be, Katie is bringing *lux et veritas* to these women.

Jesus says "Do not be afraid," and he might just as easily be talking not about the scary conversation he and Peter had had, but about what they're about to do, which is go back down the mountain. They're going to keep moving, keep living the kingdom, walking into the unknown. But they shouldn't be afraid, because they've just seen the reality that lies behind their everyday life, which is that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. If his way is the way of willingness to suffer, to be present among the lowliest of people, as signs of the places to which God is drawn, then they are doing it just exactly right.

Radiant God, you revealed yourself in your son, Jesus, when he was transfigured on the mountain before his disciples. Reveal yourself to us daily, so that we might enlighten others with the good news of your love. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

ⁱ <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/07/why-we-did-it-review-tim-miller-republican-party-donald-trump.html>