

Stumbling towards Jesus

This wonderful sermon title is Glenn Monson's but the sermon text is mine. As you read the gospel of Mark it describes the situation of the disciples, failing and stumbling yet moving towards Jesus. And it captures my own journey of discipleship as one who has failed and stumbled many times yet have found myself picked up by the grace of God, so always moving towards Jesus in the end.

Again this week there is some distance between what the disciples understand and what Jesus is telling them. The disciples are thinking of insiders versus outsiders. Meanwhile Jesus is drawing all to himself.

Earlier in Mark there is a story of Jesus telling his disciples to feed the masses because they have been gathered to listen to him. The disciples cannot imagine how to feed thousands with a few loaves and fish and Jesus in their midst. But Jesus can imagine it and there are leftovers.

The disciples were out on a boat when a storm came up. Jesus on shore noticing their distress walked out on the sea, got in the boat and calmed the wind. The disciples' hearts are reported to be hardened and unable to perceive who Jesus is and what the unfolding kingdom of God is about. As soon as the boat lands at Gennesaret, though, the crowds recognize Jesus.

They bring their sick ones that they might be healed. All who even touched the fringe of Jesus garments were healed.

In Mark 7 when the Pharisees and scribes question Jesus practice of traditions, it is the Lord who teaches them that saying the right thing is not the same as doing what is righteous. The disciples find themselves close to the Pharisees as they stumble with understanding this teaching.

Jesus continues to move with the disciples. He heals those brought to him. He orders those healed to keep his authoritative actions out of the media. Much of it leaks and his fame spreads. He teaches and has compassion for the many who are attracted to him who even come out to the desert to see him. A second time he wishes to feed the crowds, all of them, numbering 4,000, and he does.

But his disciples resist. They are unable to imagine what is possible and unable to see the Lord of Life who is near them. This time Jesus' exasperation is clear as he says: Don't you see? Aren't your hearts open? Can't you hear what I am saying? Don't you remember the abundance of the first mass meal? Don't you understand? Their stumbling persists.

Yes, they stumble in that they cannot make sense of who Jesus is and what it means to follow him but they do remain with him at this point in the story. They do engage him in conversation and you can find them asking questions.

One scholar of life, Ed Friedman, used to say he would ask the same question until he stopped getting new answers. Then he figured he had information to make a claim. I think it is a good practice to keep on asking questions until I am no longer hearing new answers. Then I might be able to say that I have found something.

Given all that they were encountering as they followed Jesus, I am quite sympathetic to their failures to demonstrate faith. In our reading for today they develop an “us versus them” mentality and their misunderstanding deepens to mistrust of others.

John son of Zebedee sees a stranger casting out demons in Jesus name and he is suspicious. John and the disciples have been on the inside track for a while, and even though they struggle with knowing Jesus, they are committed to him. How can another who has not had the privilege of sitting at Jesus feet act in his name? Who can be for Jesus and who might be against him?

I grew up happy to go to church. The first pastor I remember as jovial and he played the harmonica. I have great memories of Sunday school, the Christmas Program with the reward of a bag of peanuts, candies and apple, and of Vacation Bible School because Mom let us buy a can of Shasta pop for our lunch. It was a treat to have pop. When I was young I thought every family was like my family, therefore everyone went to church and was happy to do so, in my mind.

Then I heard something disturbing to my image of this happy life. I listened as my folks talked about a member of my home congregation having invited some new folks of the community to our church (all good) with an added word that they might not like attending the other Lutheran church (this was disturbing). Then my folks talked about how some members of the other Lutheran church would do the same in reference to my home church. This was an “us versus them” mentality which was very unhealthy for the congregations and the community and very disturbing to me as a young person.

How could this be? What were these few people seeing or not seeing as they spoke ill of other Christians within our small community? I was a kid so I don't know all the reasons why this happened but I have seen this type of divisive thinking occur time and again in ministry sites. We are quick to judge. We easily cut off from others who differ from us. We create chasms between differing sides. But Jesus said, “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas was known to display a Mennonite poster on his office door at Duke Divinity School which read: “A modest proposal for peace: let the Christians of the world resolve not to kill each other.” He was known to quip with students who asked about this saying that it would be good for Christians to stop killing anyone, but you have to start somewhere.

What is missing from the picture of tolerance? What is missing is recognition that we are all much more alike than different. What is missing is an abiding respect and regard for the other no matter the differences. Giving respect and regard to another human being is a way to love and serve the other as Jesus was demonstrating. Without that way of sacrificing self for the sake of the other, for the sake of Jesus' way, the path leads to destruction.

Often people find it easier to speak ill of another if they are not invested in a relationship with the other. This is part of what has happened in Congress since the mid-1990's. When Republicans gained a majority in the House in 1994, the Majority Leader Newt Gingrich counseled Republicans to move their families back to their home districts instead of living in Washington. On the surface this sounded good, but one of the perhaps unintended consequences was that families of the whole Congress stopped meeting each other on a social level. They stopped having encounters off the battle-field of the House chambers. They no longer knew one another on a personal level. Efforts to create relationships today are welcomed rather than sitting apart from one another on strict partisan lines.

But I think it is deeper than that. My home community is proof that you can go to Friday night games and still be divided, and the problem seems to be seeing the other as one as vulnerable as yourself and in need of Christ as you are. Maybe what is also needed is a word which can catch us up short and point us to our need of Christ.

The apostle Paul was humbled by Christ along the road to Damascus. He knew the law, he knew cultures, and he was passionate, but before Christ called him up short he was arresting Christians. He did not see Jesus nor did he have faith to understand the kingdom goals. His sin was met by life changing grace of God. Then the good news poured out of him.

“The righteousness of God (comes) through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. There is no distinction, since all have sinned (stumbled and failed) and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, being redeemed (bought back) in Christ Jesus, whom God put forth as a sacrifice for sin.”

God through Jesus bridges the gap created by sin, by stumbling, which none of us can avoid. It is this righteousness of God, this grace which comes to us as a gift, which ends our differing madness, heals our true selves and creates space for us to begin again to give regard for the other as human beings along similar journeys. What might we find in common with another?

I grew up in the 70's. Today in the small town where I grew up there is a new congregation formed from the two former Lutheran ones. They are more whole today than 50 years ago. None of us have reached the full measure of the complete and whole life which is the kingdom goal. But we may be on the way when we strive to live the disciple life.

Jesus delivers us from our bondage to “us versus them” mentalities and resets ourselves and restores us to the possibilities of wholeness with life with and for one another. In this life which Jesus is showing us the avenues are plentiful.