

April 7, 2019

Journey – Steps or Leaps Forward

Prayer

May the words of my mouth be mediations of our hearts and be always acceptable unto Thee. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Sermon

In the first century church the people were trying to figure out what exactly it meant to be the church. They were trying to figure out what's important and what's not, who's important and who's not. In the church in Philippi that Paul wrote this letter to, that we heard from this morning, there was a controversy going on. It was a church, a congregation that was made up both of former Jews and gentiles. The Jews seemed to have the impression that because they had lived their life in the first covenant that that was the way, and possibly the only way, to truly be a part of this new thing called the church. That you had to be first a good Jew before you could be a good Christian.

Now, granted, they knew all of the backstory. They knew the law. They knew the prophets. They had lived according to the law as best they could. That made them somewhat proud and feel superior to the gentiles who were just learning about the Old Testament readings and had not lived according to the law. So there was some controversy. Are they full members of the church or do they need to become good Jews in order to become good Christians?

Paul writes this letter to try to help solve the controversy. Part of me wanted to say put the Jews in their place because of that feeling of superiority, but he writes this letter. The portion that was read this morning you can hear Paul say, "Listen, guys, you think you're so good, you think you have done all that you should do as Jews. Well just let me tell you this, I was a Jew among Jews. I was a Hebrew born of Hebrews. I'm from the family of Benjamin. I was a Pharisee, so according to the law I was observing the law more strictly than many of you, or maybe all of you.

I was so zealous for the faith, for the covenant of Moses that I would persecute ... That I persecuted the church because I believed," and he doesn't say this but this is the fact, because he believed that Jesus was ... Had led people astray, that the followers of Jesus were being led astray from the true faith of the Jews. Now, they were familiar with that covenant. He was familiar with that covenant. He had lived according to it all his life. But then came that moment on the road to Damascus, came that moment when he came face to face with the risen Lord. When the bright light shone around him. When he fell to the ground. Paul, why are you persecuting me? Well, who are you, Lord? Obviously there was a power here. He wanted to know. He was willing to know who are you. Well, I'm Jesus, the one that you're persecuting.

We know that Paul underwent a conversion experience that began at that moment, but it continued on. Not only was he introduced to Jesus at that time, he was sent to a particular house. Silas began to teach him what it was to be a follower of Jesus. We also know that for three years he was set apart. He was not simply going from Pharisaic Jew to apostle in a moment. I believe that during that three years he had more face to face conversations with Jesus. He learned what his role was to be. Why God had chosen him. And what he was to do as an evangelist and an apostle.

He was successful in going from city to city and preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, even though he had never seen him in his earthly ministry. He was able to convert both Jew and gentile to believe that Jesus was the messiah. To believe that they were called to be a part of this new community called the church, called to be a change agent in modern parlance in the world. When the church in Philippi is having this controversy about if you have to be a good Jew before you could be a good Christian, he's putting them in their place, saying, "That's not necessary. I was the best Jew that you could be. I was a Pharisee. I was zealous. I was a persecutor of the church, but all that stuff was, once I came face to face with Jesus, that meant nothing. It all went away.

What I was so proud of, and the accomplishments that I had made as a Pharisaic Jew, I now count as loss." It was lost time. Doesn't mean anything to him anymore. I look back on it and I see it as rubbish, to be tossed out, because of this new and so much better relationship that I have with God through Jesus Christ. That is the important thing. That's what he goes on to tell the Philippians. That's the important thing. Doesn't matter where you started. None of that is important once you hear and know the gospel. Once you hear and know and accept the gospel as an invitation to be in relationship with God in a very intimate relationship.

And a new way of seeing one another as God's children, as brothers and sisters, whether you be Jew or gentile, doesn't matter. You have been called. You are a new creation, just as Paul was born again, if you will, during that timeframe. He goes on beyond that. He goes on to say that, "I know what I have been called to, been called to do life and eternal life. I've been called to be a part of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Not that I've already attained that, but I'm working hard towards it. I'm looking forward. I'm trying to move forward in that relationship, both with God and Jesus Christ and with all of you."

It's a journey that started dramatically. It was a journey that led him to be the greatest evangelist that the church ever knew. It wasn't complete. It wasn't finished. He knew and understood that. So he always was looking forward. Always looking to where God was leading him next. Always looking to what he needed to share with the church so that it could become the community that Jesus wanted, that Jesus contemplated. I think sometimes that even though we started off, most of us, maybe all of us, I don't know, as young folks as Christians. We didn't have this dramatic kind of conversion experience from one religion to another. I have known people who have had that, but most of us sitting here today probably started off in either a nonreligious home or a Christian home. We've kind of grown into the people that we are and the Christians that we are. We feel like we have a pretty good grasp on what it is to be a Christian. We're living our lives okay. We come to church on Sunday. Maybe I shouldn't say put a few dollars in the plate. I could go out and I do supper on Saturday once a month, or once a year. We all have our levels of who we are as Christians.

The fear is that we kind of just stop there. I've kind of reached my limit. Now, I'm not perfect. I'm sure that I could be a little bit better Christian somehow, some way, but is it really necessary? And in the back of my mind I hear Paul shouting, "Yes. It's really necessary. This is a journey that we're on. Just because you come to a certain place, doesn't mean there's no further to go." He had come to a certain place in his faith, in his relationship with God, as a Pharisee. Then, it took a leap forward as a Christian. I believe that the same thing happens in our Christian lives. That as long as we are opening our eyes and our ears to God. That God will continue to lead us to become closer to the image that God sees in us already. That we come closer to becoming the children of God that God knows that we can be.

But it's important for us, like Paul, to keep moving forward, to keep looking, to keep listening, to try to understand what the next step is. For Paul, it was going from this town to this town to this town, and

ultimately to Spain to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. That was his job. That's what he did to grow more and more into that relationship with God. We need to ask ourselves, "What is God leading us to?" Many times on our own we don't ask the question, or, and this is more likely, we don't listen to the answer. And part of that is because we are so consumed with the things that are going on in our lives. They're full. We've got jobs, we've got children, we've got grandchildren. We have got this hobby and that hobby, and these things that need to be done and those things that need to be done. Then, they want me to go to church, too. There's just so much. There are so many hours in the day, right? We fill that time. We have those moments where we could really enjoy some silence and really listen to God, we don't. We fill it with TV noise or radio noise, or you listen on your phones, on your iPads, on your computer. There's always something going on.

That's one of the reasons why in Lent we say give something up so you can have some time of quiet. You can carve out time so that you can listen to God. Speak to God, yes, but listen to God. I also know that sometimes we need a little more help than just the quiet. Some of the things that really seem to help, really seem to grab hold of people and help them to move forward in that journey getting closer in relationship to God are these things called retreats. Now, retreats can take a lot of forms. You can have a private retreat. You can go off into the woods somewhere. I wouldn't go in a tent, maybe a cabin, but not a tent, and have time. Leave all the electronics behind. Maybe take a Bible, make take a spiritual book of some kind. Be in nature and be in the silence. Allow it to speak to you anew and see if the voice of God comes through calling you to something more, something maybe greater. Some of the best retreats, and some of the times when I hear people have been touched and moved to move forward in their life in God, is when it's a directed retreat where there are others and a leader and someone helping to look at the world and look at life a little differently. To look at who you are and who you are called to be.

Even have time with some one-on-one where you can actually have some direction from someone else who may be a little further on in their journey, like Paul was to the Philippian church. One of those retreat weekend type of things ... You know, I had my phone in my pocket earlier and I was so afraid that that was going to happen because Cindy's on a retreat, right? Cindy is actually on a retreat. We're still trying to figure out how she's getting home, but I decided even though I know I've turned the volume off I didn't want it to vibrate in my pocket. Okay? That was not me. I still don't know how Cindy's getting home, but ... One kind of retreat that has swept across the Episcopal church, and this for years, is what's called a Cursillo weekend. I've received always mixed reviews, depending on where it's held and who's holding it and what the person goes with. It helps depend on what they come back with. A Cursillo weekend is a weekend where you kind of give yourself over to other Christians, mostly lay, some ordained. It is a commitment to leave everything at home. The family problems, the job problems, the electronics.

Back in the day, I don't know if they do this now or not, you had to give up your watch for the weekend. You talk about some people getting nuts. That's true. Yeah. They didn't know how to respond not knowing what time it was. They were told when to be here and when to be there. It's an opportunity to hear about other Christian journeys. Where that's helpful is it gives you possibilities. It helps you hear what it's like to hear the voice of God speak and to lead you to something new. It's times of silence where you have that opportunity not only hearing the word of God spoken and preached and shared through worship, through talks, but opportunities to be quiet and to listen for answers to the very questions that you have not just in your mind but in your heart.

It's those kind of things, like a Cursillo weekend, retreat weekends of others, or getting off by yourself, are those moments where we can intentionally move forward. Intentionally allow God to speak to us and say, "I want you to come here. I want you to try something new. I want you to use your gifts and talents that I have given you in this way so that you can be there for the broken, for the sick, for the imprisoned, for those who are treated unjustly." Give yourself time. Give yourself space. Take advantage of some of the weekends and retreats that this diocese offers or the church offers throughout the state and the area. Allow God to speak to you and be open. Be open to a voice that says, "I love you as you are, but we can go further. I love who you are, but I love who you are becoming as well." Allow God to lead you into that becoming. Take advantage of the opportunities that are out there. Take that step or take that leap to get closer to God.