



Sermon, September 10, 2017
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Tending the Path “Introduction”

Scriptures:

Matthew 28:16-20 (NRSV)

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Acts 1:1-9 (NRSV)

¹ In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” ⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight

On a hilltop with Jesus

Go with me either to a mountaintop in Galilee or an unknown place in Jerusalem. Jesus ascends or vanishes from their presence, commissioning to take his message and teachings about the kingdom of heaven out into the whole world. They had no buildings, no professional staff, no choirs, no hospitals, no denominational bodies, no basilicas, no cathedrals, nothing. Just their clothes and the teachings of one they called “Rabbi,” and then, later, “Lord.” How did we get from this place to where we are today?

Called out and sent

The people who gathered on the hilltop with Jesus in Galilee or met with him during the forty days after his resurrection in Jerusalem were the people whom Jesus had called out to follow him, watch him closely, learn from him, and who were then sent out by Jesus to heal people, drive out demons, feed and care for people, and to teach about the love of God that transcended all human divisions and barriers.

It was a Way of thinking, a Way of living, a Way of transforming human relationships, and a Way of spiritual and personal healing and expansion of consciousness. It encompassed body, mind, and soul. It kept you grounded on the earth, in the here and now at the same time it flooded you with the power of the Spirit and a vision of the Eternal. It transformed people into being the means whereby the prayer "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" was made real. This is what Jesus taught and equipped his followers to become and to do.

What we are now

So, how are we doing with this? There is a popular sermon illustration that has made the rounds the past few years. See what you think of it:

Russ Blowers is a minister who is active in his local Indianapolis Rotary club. At the club meeting each week a member gives a brief statement about his job.

When it was his turn, Russ said: "I'm with a global enterprise. We have branches in every country in the world. We have our representatives in nearly every parliament and boardroom on earth. We're into motivation and behavior alteration.

We run hospitals, feeding stations, crisis pregnancy centers, universities, publishing houses, and nursing homes. We care for our clients from birth to death.

We are into life insurance and fire insurance. We perform spiritual heart transplants. Our original Organizer owns all the real estate on earth plus an assortment of galaxies and constellations. He knows everything and lives everywhere. Our product is free for the asking. (There's not enough money to buy it.)

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Our CEO was born in a hick town, worked as a carpenter, didn't own a home, was misunderstood by his family, hated by enemies, walked on water, was condemned to death without a trial, and arose from the dead-
-I talk with him every day."

The church is the most amazing organization in the world!

It is a very accurate description of what the church has become, isn't it? But you can see immediately the model it is based upon: that of a large, multi-national business enterprise. That model worked in the 20th Century as the nations of the world tried to rebuild their entire societies after the desolation and destruction of two world wars. But is it what Jesus sent his followers out to do?

The current times

All around us, society is changing. Attendance patterns in churches are changing. Article after article attempts to parse various generational behaviors regarding faith expression and group involvement. Core-level values and foundational worldviews are shifting, with new values threatening older values, resulting in a fractured and conflicted culture. Religion has come to be viewed not as a unifying factor, but as a divisive factor. In very many ways, the usefulness and significance of religion (defined broadly) is being questioned and challenged. This is a time in which the collective soul of humankind and the church is being tried and tested. How will we respond in ways that are not reactive and reactionary, but are culturally creative and will contribute to the well-being of all humankind and the earth itself?

All of these factors are converging upon us in ways that are resulting in high anxiety among church members, uncertainty among the leadership, mistrust of pastoral and congregational leadership, and can be expressed in negative and divisive ways if not addressed directly, honestly, and compassionately. When this societal uncertainty and confusion is added to an individual congregation that is going through its own pastoral leadership change, it can create a great deal of stress.

I have felt this stress in the churches I have served or been involved with for the past 37 years. We are all struggling with what it means to live our

lives with integrity as followers of Jesus Christ. We all come to this adventure of following Jesus as wondrously broken and flawed individuals. We can be cranky, sometimes downright mean, we have our prejudices and biases, we carry wounds of war, abuse, shattered dreams, betrayed love, broken promises. And we can find ourselves packing kits to send across the world to be used by people we will never meet, buying food for a stranger who is hungry, breaking bread with people whose politics we disagree with, and praying for the health and well-being of people we barely know. We are wondrously flawed. And that means we are just exactly like those people who walked the dusty roads of ancient Palestine, of Galilee and Judea, tagging along after this man they barely understood, but who spoke words that stirred their hearts with visions of their eternal worth as beloved children of One God.

We think our problem is getting people inside these walls to sit in these pews alongside of us and join us in our projects and programs. We think our problem is raising enough money to pay the pastor (by the way, thank you for your gracious faithfulness in that regard) or keep the lights on. We think our problem is... well, you fill in the blank. We have all spoken the words, voiced the fears, registered our concerns.

But somehow, reading these stories from the Bible, I don't think these were Jesus' concerns. He came to show us the love of the One he called Abba, Father. He came to show us how that love can heal our hurts, change our misdirected ways of thinking, and make enemies into friends and perhaps even brothers and sisters. He came not just to perform miraculous works, but to *transform* human hearts and human societies. He said he was the Way to that source of loving transformation, and he taught and lived that Way of Being. And it is that Way of Being that he gave to his followers and commanded them to hand on to others, all around the world.

A year ago, I went on a personal renewal retreat up at Camp Magruder for a week. At Magruder, there is a labyrinth marked out in a sandy field towards the beach from the cabins. I decided to start my mornings after breakfast with a slow meditative walk through the labyrinth. As I walked

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the labyrinth, I would pull a weed here and there, replace stones that once marked the sides of the path, clear out sticks that blocked the path. I tended that path. As I sat in quiet reflection and meditation in the center of the labyrinth, I was flooded with the realization that we have been given a Path by Jesus to tend. It is a lifelong path of growth and discovery, of risk and adventure, of deep mystery and boundless joy. And I believe that Jesus wants us to get back on this Path.

Invitation to walk

I am completely convinced that the times in which we are living are calling us to return to the Path that Jesus brought. We are at a crossroads and we need to pause, get our bearings, and reassess who we are and what we are about. But this is not an overnight fix. So, for the next nine months, I am planning a sermon series and related workshops that will, first, look at how we got to this place in human history; second, what is so vitally compelling about the Path of Jesus; and, three, how we might structure our life together so that we can not only tend this Path together, but thrive while we do it, and enjoy the journey as we walk it.