

Emmaus Road Mennonite

February 19, 2012

Anita Rediger

### “Only Jesus”

*“The mighty one, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.” Psalm 50:1*

Many of you would remember Lucille Gilliom. She was the first secretary to the executive director of Swiss Village and a charter resident, too! Her residential room was just down the hall from my office when I started at Swiss Village – 15 years ago! By that time, Lucille was already challenged by low vision; that reality continued into her years in health care. Most of the time she coped marvelously. One could walk down the corridor with her and not be aware of what she *wasn't* seeing. One day, however, I came upon Lucille, walker before her, facing straight into the wall. She was disoriented and really was “stuck.” I remember the ache I felt as I realized in that moment how blind Lucille really was.

The ability to see is a marvelous gift. Yet, “seeing” entails so much more than the physiological responses of the rods and cones of our physical eye. Recently, I enjoyed Dorothy’s marveling over the construction and function of the human eye. No wonder Dorothy was such a good teacher – she has the gift of wonder!

At Swiss Village, I’ve become much more aware of the variables which impact eyesight. Some folks are coping with the limitations that come with macular degeneration, others with the effects of glaucoma. Some have cataracts. And this on top of the challenges to vision that comes with being over 40! Yet, even when the eye itself is in good health one can have poor vision. I am most struck by the effects of dementia on the ability to see. The eye is collecting the various nuances of color and tone, but the mind translates these images inaccurately. When the sight of an adult child evokes the greeting of “Mother!” or when the change in the color of the carpet is perceived as an opening or step it is evident that “seeing” happens ultimately in the mind.

Many of us have “overlooked” items we were searching for only to have someone else point it out immediately! How is it that, late at night, the mistake in the check book can seem impossible to spot, but the next morning nearly jumps off the page before us? It is fascinating to think about the ways that familiarity “blinds” us to circumstances that may be clear and evident to others.

This morning’s Gospel is an account that invites to consider how we “see” Jesus. Who am I talking about when I say that I believe in Jesus? What are the attributes or attitudes that cause me to say “That’s like Jesus”? As Philip Yancy infers by the title of his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, “Jesus” can mean different things to different people!

Let’s think about the physical images of Jesus which come to mind? For many of us they may be images that come out of the artwork of Warner Sallman, “Head of Christ,”

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“Christ at Heart’s Door,” “The Lord is My Shepherd.” (show old print which hung in Grandma F.’s living room on the west wall.)

Gratefully, we’re growing in our awareness of our tendency to create Jesus in our image! As we connect with Middle Eastern people, we have a more accurate sense of Jesus’ physical attributes. For example, I’ve thought to myself, “I bet Jesus looked a lot like Zabi!” As we think of Jesus, who do you see in your mind’s eye? What childhood images formed your idea? How has that image changed over the years?

By taking time to consider more critically our own assumptions about Jesus, we open ourselves to the world of the first disciples – who had images and assumptions of their own!

As I’ve mentioned before, the Gospel of Mark is our focus for this entire year. During the season of Easter, our Gospel readings will come from John, but otherwise we’ll be immersing ourselves in this earliest of the Gospels. This morning, you may note that we’ve jumped ahead from the early chapters and find ourselves at Chapter 9. This is due to the designation of this Wednesday as Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. (Lent – 40 days prior to Easter not counting the Sundays, Easter- 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday following the 1<sup>st</sup> full moon following the Spring equinox, March 20, Full Moon – April 6, Easter – April 8) (NOT TO BE INCLUDED IN SPOKEN SERMON)

The story of the transfiguration is the pivotal story between Epiphany and Lent. Every year on the Sunday prior to Ash Wednesday we’ll retell this mountaintop story. Last year, we studied Matthew’s account, chap. 17. Next year, it will be the account from Luke 9! In any case, that’s why we’ve suddenly jumped to Chapter 9. In the weeks following Pentecost we’ll return to earlier chapters of Mark.

Mark 9 – a pivotal text on our church calendar; Mark 9 - a pivotal text in the Gospel itself. Biblical scholars divide the Gospel of Mark into two sections with the accounts of chapters 8 & 9 as the turning points of the Gospel. The first half of the Gospel concludes on the depressing note that the disciples’ eyes, ears and hearts have failed them – at least in regards to their understandings of Jesus. Jesus has just provided bread for 4000 men when the disciples get into the boat and begin to fret because “they had forgotten to bring bread.” “Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them, ‘Do you not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember...that I’ve provided bread for thousands? Do you still not understand?’ 8:19-21. (with seeming irony...the next story Mark records is that of a blind man receiving sight...)”

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Yet, Jesus doesn't send these dim-sighted men away; instead he and his disciples continue their common travels. While they were on their way to villages around Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked them "Who do people say that I am? And what about you? Who do you say that I am?" Quick-to-speak Peter confesses Jesus as Lord, but then immediately rebukes Jesus when he speaks of to them of the impending suffering which lies ahead. No, Jesus wasn't demonstrating "divine clairvoyance" about the future, rather he was aware that his devotion to the kingdom of God – on earth – would inevitably provoke "the powers."

That is, the fear, hatred, greed, falsehood, violence and despair propping up the imperial state would not tolerate Jesus' allegiance to the power of God's nonviolent, justice-seeking love.

So, again, it really is no accident then that the second half of Mark opens with the story of a blind man. (8:22) Like blind men, the disciples struggle to "see" what Jesus intended by what he said and did. Their lack of understanding is evident again in the account of the Transfiguration. The event on the mountaintop make it unmistakable who Jesus is: he is to be associated in importance to Moses, the law-giver and Elijah, who is by tradition the forerunner of the Messiah. (Reference 6:14) In the midst of a display of Christ's heavenly glory, Peter remains confused and fearful. Peter proclaims Jesus as Lord, yet he still "sees" Jesus through the traditional Messianic script; a script that affirms the myth in which the hero prevails over the enemy through superior and "righteous" force. Ched Myers writes, "With this oldest lie Satan rules history, as nations and peoples invoke God while they destroy their enemies through "just wars" and crusades." To this world-view, Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan!"

At this turning point in the Gospel, together with the still "seeing-impaired" disciples, this week, we enter the self-examining season of Lent. At this pivotal time in Jesus ministry, he calls to the crowd and to his disciples and saying, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." 8:34

*"Taking up the cross:" The cross was not a religious icon in first-century Palestine, nor was "taking up the cross" a metaphor for personal anguish. Crucifixion had only one connotation: it was the vicious form of capital punishment reserved by imperial Rome for political dissidents. Crosses were a common sight when Mark wrote, since there was a Jewish insurrection under way. In contrast to Judean nationalists who were recruiting patriots to "take up the sword" against Rome, Mark's Jesus invited disciples to "take up the cross. Under interrogation by state security forces, admitting allegiance to "God's sovereignty" would result in charges of subversion in world where Caesar alone claimed lordship. Self-denial (in the day of Jesus) was about costly political choices.*

Ched Myers – *Say To This Mountain*, 102

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It is of utmost importance to clarify that self-denial is not the negation of self that has often been “expected” of women. *Throughout history such abuse of the Gospel and of women has had immeasurable social and human cost. No.....The Gospel invitation to deny self does not refer to the negation of experience, selfhood, human rights, or physical integrity. Rather it challenges the self as the center of one’s universe. It calls us out of life centered in individualism and self-interest and into life according to God’s love.*

- Ched Myers, pg108

Just as when Peter rebuked Jesus as he renounced Jesus’ impending suffering, on the Mount of Transfiguration he is challenged again; this time by a voice from the cloud. Still operating from a framework of tradition and triumphalism, Peter wants to “institutionalize” the moment by establishing a “tabernacle” for the three leaders. With nearly the same proclamation as at Jesus’ baptism (1.11), this time the testimony is addressed to the seemingly obtuse disciples.” Instead of “you are my beloved son,” the voice says “this is my beloved son” with the added words, “listen to him!”

Almost painfully, however, as the disciples head down the mountain, instead of “listening to Jesus,” they reveal their on-going allegiance to the authority of the scribal class.: “What do the teachers of the Law say about these things?”

...and Mark’s stories continue...more stories about the disciples and their struggle to understand Jesus’ call to “follow.” (take note of the bracketing of these stories by healing accounts of deaf and blind persons as we remember Jesus’ lament, “Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?”)

For the earliest of disciples, “seeing” Jesus was an ever-unfolding experience. We, too, share the challenge of identifying our allegiances and being aware of our assumptive world-views. And, just as for the first disciples, Jesus invites us to ongoing acts of repentance. As Jesus continues to face the Jerusalems of our day, may we ponder our place on the path of discipleship, asking...

- To whom do I really look as I seek direction as I make decisions?
- As I seek to be follower of Jesus, who is it that I really look toward as guide?
- What “compass” do I refer to in order to orient myself among the many disorientating choices of life?
- What do I “assume” to be foundational truths? Whose voice has my ear? What marketing technique catches my eye?

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As we enter this season of self-examination, may we be encouraged and comforted that Jesus invites to continue life “on the way” with him. His Spirit goes before us; we don’t “go it alone.” Also, we have the gift of this precious community with whom we sojourn together.

As we continue to worship together, we will grow in greater understanding of the way of Jesus. When we falter, the “insights” of others will help us to regain our sight. As we serve together, we will hear more clearly Jesus’ voice....saying “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God with power...”

For...the Kingdom of God *is* visible when we see those who are hungry and feed them. The Kingdom of God *is* visible when we see the stranger and invite them to join us. The Kingdom of God *is* visible when those needing clothing are tended to and those who are sick or in prison are visited! What a mountaintop view that is! AMEN