

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship
Anita Rediger
October 18, 2009

“Still Walking Ahead”

How many times and in how many places have you heard these often quoted words of Jesus found in the Gospel of John? *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.”* John 14:6.

I wonder about these words. I wrestle with these words. As we’ve journeyed together through the Gospel of Mark in the past months, this text has often come to mind. This morning, let’s allow the thick, theological words of John 14, words spoken *“about Jesus,”* to mingle with the real-to-life people & circumstances of today’s story. This morning’s story – it offers to us yet one more invitation into the *way* of Jesus -the *way* of Jesus which reveals the (surprising) *truth* of the Father; the unlikely, *unheard* of way of Jesus which leads to *life* – and not just for a few of us!

This morning’s episode – it’s the story of the disciples once again on the road with Jesus. It’s the story of Jesus as their teacher. It’s also the story of two of the very first disciples, James and John... their quest to follow Jesus AND at the same time - their quest for special privilege. When their 10 traveling companions- also “followers” of Jesus - catch wind of James’ and John’s “private” conversation, it’s the story of their anger and protest. This is the usual story of humanity’s timeless desire to posture and position for personal gain; to get an inside advantage - while the “getting is good!” This old story is the only story the disciples have ever known!! That is until they journey with Jesus!

This is a story of incredibly Good News – for the disciples and for us - the Good News is this: even though old patterns have a real hold on us, we are not stuck – hopelessly - in their divisive, deadening grip! For the first disciples, the Good News of this story came in these words of Jesus: “that although among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as leaders lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them...it is not so among you.” Leaders that act like lords and tyrants - that’s not how it is to be among the community being formed by the first disciples; that’s not how it is to be among the disciples of any age!

Let’s join them now “on the road, going up to Jerusalem, with Jesus walking ahead of them.” And...it was like this: the disciples – they “were amazed”; the others who followed - they “were afraid.”

With incredible artistry, the Gospel writer draws us into the tension between the eagerness of what some believed to be a soon-to-conquer messianic band and the dread of

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others who were beginning to recognize – the revolutionary way of Jesus, this *way*'s threatening truth and its irresistible expression of life.

For the third time in Mark's Gospel, Jesus gathers his disciples near to him and tells them about what they can expect when they arrive in Jerusalem – He speaks to them explicitly and frankly. Jesus' way has become ever more threatening to religious and civil leaders alike. Jesus is keenly aware of the rising tension between the "way" of the Kingdom of God and the "ways" of Empire. How very important this must be to him!

Before he ever arrives in Jerusalem, it is becoming more and more obvious that Jesus is headed for trouble. It's almost certain what will happen if he continues to ignore the escalating anxiety of the religious leaders. What chance does he stand to survive if he doesn't soon acquiesce to the political maneuvers of the Roman Empire? Once again, Jesus attempts to make it clear to the disciples that what they might be "expecting" in Jerusalem will most likely will be something quite different from anything they have ever known. Jesus invites them into a "way" that leads to life, but first it is a "way" which will turn the world upside down.

It's a poignant moment, Jesus is surrounded by his twelve disciples. It's a moment of complete vulnerability. What will the disciples "hear" this time? Will they "see" what Jesus envisions for them?

- Remember, the first time Jesus brought up the subject of his passion - Peter bluntly rebuked him.
- The second time that Jesus "wanted to talk" the disciples didn't say anything to Jesus directly, and the next thing we hear is that they began to squabble among themselves about which of them would "end up" the greatest.
- This time – after many more days together, and with Jerusalem on the horizon, Jesus speaks to them again of his radical "way." With Jesus' words still hanging in the air, James and John, the sons of Zebedee come forward. This would be a great place to stop action!
 - Could it be that they draw near to Jesus in order to encourage him? Were they coming to offer affirmation of love and support? No, jarringly as we read on, it was if Jesus had not said anything at all! Is that possible!!! What was the matter with them! How could this be?

The deeply ingrained story line of their lives still prevented James and John from hearing any alternative to "all they had ever known." And James and John weren't the only ones still caught in this old model. As soon as the others heard of this "request" they weren't far behind. They reacted in anger out of their own fear of being left on the sidelines!

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From the vantage point of Empire, one needed to push and shove for the best seats! Just like everything else...Jesus was a commodity to be hoarded by those who wanted to get to the front of the line. "Me first...!"

The Good News of this morning's story for the first disciples is that - among them- leadership looks very different from their inherited "conventional wisdom." Even if "all they've ever known" is still operative in their lives, they are now followers of Jesus – and the shape of the future holds a new way of life together!

"Whoever wishes to become great must be a servant. Whoever wishes to be first must be slave of all." In the kingdom of God, leaders are welcome and needed. Leadership in the kingdom of God, is that of a servant, the way of Jesus, which reveals truth and leads to life! Mark 10:43

Rabbinical tale of Heaven and Hell –

A man spoke with the Lord about heaven and hell. "I will show you hell," said the Lord, and they went into a room which had a large pot of stew in the middle. The smell was delicious, but around the pot sat desperate people who were starving. All were holding spoons with very long handles which reached into the pot, but because the handle of the spoon was longer than their arms, it was impossible to get the stew into their mouths. Their suffering was terrible.

"Now I will show you heaven," said the Lord, and they went into another room identical to the first one. There was an identical pot of delicious stew and the people had the same long-handled spoons, but they were well-nourished, talking with one another and happy. At first the man did not understand. The two places were exactly alike! "It's like this," said the Lord. "You see, the difference is that these people have learned to feed each other."

Like the first disciples and other followers, we are an unlikely troupe – a delightful band of believers, a group of people being knit together as a community of faith. We're realizing the joy of sharing life together – nourishing one another in every way. Just like the first disciples, we're drawn to follow the way of Jesus, the way of love, of service, of welcome. At the same time it is both comforting and disturbing to know that we, too, even as we follow Jesus, will also continue to struggle with the urge to cling to well-tooled patterns; patterns which admire and reward dominance, control and the accumulation of power. Why wouldn't we? It's so much of what we've "always known!"

At our Fellowship Forum two weeks ago we reflected on who we are as a congregation. We celebrated our brief, (rich and life-giving) history. We began to talk with one another about possibilities for our future. As I "listened" to this morning's text, I found myself thinking about us, the Emmaus Road people. I recognized that although we, as a

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congregation, are fresh and young, we are also “people with a past.” (Doesn’t that sound intriguing?) We don’t need to deny the past; we don’t need to fear our past, but we do need to be aware of it. We bring our individual pasts; we bring our communal past – we bring that “which is all we’ve ever known.”

What will that mean for us as we seek to follow Jesus’ invitation into the future? How will we recognize the times when we are “hooked” by that which is “all we’ve ever known?” It may be difficult to identify, but let’s be watching for it. Let’s develop a vocabulary to help us talk about and to discern what is “operative” within us – becoming able to identify the old way of scarcity and fear, or the new, abundant way of Jesus?

Contrast the response of James and John with that of blind Bartimaeus (who will be the focus of Kevin Farmwald’s message to us next Sunday). Jesus inquires of each of them, “What do you want me to do for you?” James and John say, “Let us have the best seats in the house!” Bartimaeus, aware of his condition, simply says, “Teacher, I want to see.” Their words offer us the contrast between the way of “what’s-in-this-for-me” and the way of discipleship – certainly a challenge which remains for us, as well.

Our life together is such a gift to us. We marvel at and treasure the wonderful leading of the Spirit among us – over and over again! ...this wonderful healing way.... We walk alongside of one another, offering nurture and sustenance for the journey of life, the journey of faith. On my own pilgrimage of faith I am sustained by your companionship.

I am exceedingly grateful for the opportunity to be with you in this fellowship. Instead of feeling anxious about whether or not I belong or even if there will be room for me, I live in the spacious sense that I do belong...and that I’ll always have a seat, a really fine seat! ...no pushing or shoving needed, no “reserve signs” necessary. My deepest prayer is that it would be this way for each of us – because in the Kingdom of God there is a place for each one of us, there is room for all of us! Everyone belongs!

AMEN