

The Adventure of Being the Church in a Post-Christian World
A Sermon Series at Emory Presbyterian Church – October 11, 18 & 25, 2015
October 18: Unlearning What We Have Learned

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

- Mark 10:35-45 (NRSV)

"Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore." It's one of the most famous lines in the history of film. It was that moment when Dorothy, in the 1939 classic "The Wizard of Oz", opens her eyes after being knocked out in the midst of a terrible storm. She stands up in her bedroom, and with Toto beside her, steps outside her house – only to find herself in a strange, new, unfamiliar world.

I often wonder if the disciples of Jesus didn't again and again have such an experience. They go from place to place with this young rabbi, and again and again find themselves in what must feel like an *alternate universe*, a topsy-turvy place in which the poor are rich, and the rich are poor ... the first are last, and the last first. They're walking through a village one minute, and in the wink of an eye, they find themselves in Jesus' strange world in which true riches are discovered in giving everything away ... true happiness is found in putting others first ... true greatness is found in serving.

Everything they have ever learned, ever been conditioned to expect about the world and the way it is, is thrown up for grabs – as they continue to live into the *adventure* they started on the seashore.

In our gospel text this morning, two of Jesus' closest inner circle seem to have a problem with making out the new territory. They talk as those who aren't recognizing the space into which Jesus is leading them. In many ways, the story is hilariously sad – partly because the glory-seeking humanity of Jesus' followers on display here is all so familiar and recognizable, and

partly because Jesus has just spoken (earlier in the chapter) about humility and receiving the Kingdom of God like a child.

Perhaps to James and John that meant they should approach Jesus with a brilliantly childish demand! Imagine your own young children being quite so brazen as this: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” What a start to a meaningful exchange! It sounds like something we said to first-time substitute teachers in Middle School!

Jesus *could* have simply said, “No,” and – like a parent who says the same to their child today – would likely have had to endure some subsequent whining. But perhaps Jesus was curious. Perhaps he just wanted to see how this was going to play out. And so he played along: “What is it you want me to do for you?”

And then the two, who elsewhere are nicknamed the “Sons of Thunder”, let Jesus have it. They want to sit at Jesus’ left and right sides when he “comes in [his] glory” – expecting as they do that this journey to Jerusalem is going to end with Jesus being enthroned as the Messianic king. And they just want a piece of the action. In fact, the *top two* pieces of the action.

Perhaps their minds were otherwise occupied when – in the verses which *immediately* precede this passage – Jesus gathers the Twelve around himself and warns them that suffering, condemnation, and death await him there. Perhaps like Peter in another gospel, they just couldn’t process it and doggedly hang on to their expectations of grandeur. And so they ask what they ask.

It is interesting that Jesus, again, doesn’t just blast them for being childish numbskulls. He does note that they don’t really know what they’re asking, but nevertheless, he apparently sees it as a teachable moment and presses forward, asking them, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” Like true Sons of Thunder(!), they confidently reply *Yes*. There, they really *didn’t* understand what they were saying.

But Jesus prophetically affirms that the time will come when they *will* understand, though it won’t quite look like they presently imagine it. But to be honored with being placed on the right and left sides of the Messiah as he is revealed in his glory? No – that would be for others. And again, not quite in the way they imagine it.

For this is the strange, new world of Jesus in which adventurers will discover that the path upward is the path downward ... that success embraces suffering ... that true greatness is humble service ... that the divine glory is finally revealed in a Cross.

Today, we continue a three-Sunday sermon series which brings up this word “adventure” in this perhaps odd context: “The Adventure of *Being the Church* in a Post-Christian World.” You may remember from last week that Joseph Campbell, the renowned scholar of mythology, wrote about the three basic stages common to so many adventures:

- (1) Leaving Home – A protagonist is called to adventure and is faced with the prospect of leaving behind the familiar, safe world. This call is often met with great resistance or deep hesitation, but the “hero” – by his or her own choice or not – leaves the familiar behind and enters into (or is thrust into) a strange, new world.
- (2) Initiation – Once there, the hero is challenged to the core – initiated– facing trials and tests, and even the threat of death itself. But through these struggles the hero passes, and completes the quest – defeating the great nemesis, finding the hidden treasure. But the treasure discovered is often not what was originally sought – far, far better – and the hero is transformed.
- (3) Return – The hero finally returns then to the old, familiar world, but not as the same person and with gifts and wisdom for others.

Last week, we considered what it would mean for us as the mainline Church in 21st century America to “leave home” ... to answer the call to venture into the unknown ... and to leave behind old securities, values, and motivations in search of that life to which Jesus points.

And now, today, we would face the reality that we have stepped into our *own* strange, new (and post-Christian) space in which our traditional Christian language and norms no longer hold the privileged position in society and culture as they did a generation or two ago. In a manner of speaking, we’re being *disestablished*. We’re not in Kansas anymore. No more time for denial, pretense, or pretending. The time is now to walk forward with both eyes open. There’s no telling what lies ahead.

Fear over the mainline church's future—even its survival—has led to all kinds of efforts to secure our future along the lines of the logic of the world, not unlike the grab of these fearful disciples, rather than risking this wilderness, this way of the cross. It is the essence of the old, familiar world to seek *control* – control over the times and over others – and it should hardly surprise us that James and John reach for it when Jesus says alarming things about suffering.

Of course, assuming James and John really *did* somehow understand Jesus all along, the option of despair was present too. And no doubt, many today – without saying so – have made *that* choice. Perhaps decline and death are simply our fate – and we should just accept it and drift away. But as those who belong to Christ, as those who *are* a people of the Cross, but *also* of the *Resurrection*, that will not be if we can but open our eyes to another startling possibility. As well as any other contemporary theologian, Douglas John Hall sees this. He writes,

Given a modicum of grace and imagination, thinking Christians today may prepare themselves to see in our disestablishment, not an impersonal destiny such as may be the fate of any institution, but the will and providence of God. Protestant traditions of theology insist that God is at work in history, and that the divine Spirit creates, recreates, judges and renews the body of Christ. What is happening to the churches of Europe and North America today cannot be received by us as though it were devoid of purpose. The hand of God is in it.

(Douglas John Hall, “An Awkward Church,” Part 1)

The hand of God is in it!

This is a hard word, but where the reality of these times has been embraced, where this path through the wilderness has been accepted, even as from the very hand of God, there has been the experience of, as Hall puts it, “both release and opportunity: release from the duties of chaplaincy to authority; opportunity for truer, untrammelled service of God and creation.” Here we may find, as we live and learn the lessons of this space, a *hidden* blessing beyond what we might ever have hoped for. As Hall concludes: “We might discover that God is offering us another possibility, a new form, indeed, *new life!*”

This path through the unfamiliar – of unlearning what we have learned – is the path of initiation into the ways and mind of Jesus. But it *is* a *strange* path – one that runs counter to our common sense, to every fiber of our being which wants to hold on to control, to be the masters of our own destiny, to take charge of our survival. Relinquishing this control would seem to make no sense, but failing to do so, Jesus would have us see, is to turn away from *him*, even as he would walk with us. It is to turn away from the only *true* greatness a church may hope to have.

There is a story told of a famous monastery that had fallen on very hard times. Once upon a time, its many buildings were *filled* with young monks – it was a thriving success – and people would visit from far and wide to be nourished there. But now it was all but deserted. People no longer came to worship, and only a handful of old monks shuffled through the halls, serving God with heavy hearts.

On the edge of the monastery woods, an old rabbi had built a little hut. He would come there from time to time to fast and pray. One day, the abbot of the monastery decided to visit the rabbi and open his heavy heart to him. So, he set out through the woods, and as he approached the hut, the abbot saw the rabbi standing in the doorway, as if he had been waiting for his arrival, his arms outstretched in welcome. They embraced like long-lost brothers.

After a time of silence, the rabbi said: “You and your brothers are serving God with heavy hearts. You have come to ask a teaching of me. I will give you a teaching, but you can repeat it only once. After that, no one must ever say it aloud again.”

The rabbi looked straight at the abbot and said, “The Messiah is among you.” For a while, all was silent. Then the rabbi said, “Now you must go.” The abbot left without a word and without ever looking back.

The next morning, the abbot called his monks together. He told them he had received a teaching from the rabbi and that the teaching could only be spoken aloud one time. Then he looked at the group of assembled brothers and said, “The rabbi said that the Messiah is among us.”

The monks were startled by this. “What could it mean?” they asked themselves.

“Is Brother John the Messiah? Or Brother Matthew or Brother Thomas? Am I the Messiah? What could all this mean? Or what if it’s not one of us at all, but one of the few visitors we receive?” They were all deeply puzzled by the rabbi’s teaching, but no one ever mentioned it again.

As time went by, the monks began to treat one another with a new and very special reverence. A gentle, warm-hearted compassion began to grow among them. They began to *live* as people who had finally found what they were looking for, yet they *worked* as people who were always looking for something else.

When visitors came to the monastery they were deeply moved by the life of these monks, for they, too, were treated with great compassion and reverence, for – who knows? – one of them could be the one. Word spread, and before long people were coming from far and wide to worship with the monks and experience their loving reverence. Soon, other young men were asking, once again, to become a part of the community, and the community grew.

The rabbi’s teaching had been true, of course. For in their compassion and reverence for one another, in their service of one another and others, the Messiah was indeed among them.

As we journey together in this time and place, slowly unlearning what we have learned, may we live ever deeper into the paschal mystery – the mystery of life and death and new life. May we unlearn the logic of the world: When we would fall into fear and reach for control, or when we would shrink away in despair, stricken by hopelessness, may we learn to trust that there is *something more* at work in and through us.

In letting go of an all-consuming concern for ourselves, and in giving ourselves away in unselfish service within and beyond walls of stone, may we come to embody – not prestige or what the world might call success – but that which Christ alone can call and love into being: a Church which truly exists for *others*, a Beloved Community, which the world in its deepest heart longs to see.

And may we journey forward as those who, above all else, long to see it too.

To the Glory of God. Amen.