

It's a Journey, a sermon on Mark 9:30-37

Preached on September 19, 2021, by the Rev. Mary Keenan at St. Mark's Episcopal Church

One thing is certain when you read the Gospel of Mark - there will be a lot of action, a lot of movement. After he is propelled from baptism to the wilderness, Jesus starts recruiting his team of disciples by asking them to follow him - they left their jobs, their families and did just that. Literally followed him on a journey.

The disciples walk with Jesus and sail with him a lot of places once they decide to join him. By the end of Chapter 1, this group has traveled from the towns of Galilee to the Sea of Galilee, to their home base in Capernaum, and then to more towns around Galilee.

After that, they go to Capernaum again, to the Sea of Galilee again, back to Capernaum, back to the Sea of Galilee, around to various towns and villages and on and on.

In Chapter 6, they make a longer trip over to Nazareth, Jesus' hometown. That didn't go so well, so the group all hits the road again. Back to villages and towns, the Sea of Galilee, Genneseret, Tyre, Sidon, Decapolis, Bethsaida, Caesaria Philippi.

And now they are back to traveling around the villages of Galilee and to Capernaum. Again.

After this their travel will become longer, but more directed. Instead of wandering around to the many locations in and around Galilee, they will take the long road to Judea, Bethany, and, finally, Jerusalem.

All along this journey, Jesus is healing people, teaching with parables, teaching by example, meeting people on the beach and in the synagogue. Sometimes his followers "get" what he is trying to tell them, and sometimes they don't. Sometimes they miss the point entirely as they do in the lesson we hear today.

He tries to tell them about the suffering, death, and resurrection he will experience very soon. They do not understand. He's been showing them by example that he welcomes people who are not great by any of the world's standards, and they still argue about who among them is the greatest by the world's standards.

We could go on all day about the specific lessons Jesus is trying to teach them, the meaning of his words. But what strikes me is that no matter how much those lessons evade them - the disciples still follow Jesus. They don't give up on him and he doesn't give up on them. They keep traveling together.

That's a pretty amazing thing to consider - this group walking all over their small area of the world, helping to spread a message they only barely understand. They clearly want to

understand. They keep asking questions and trying really hard! They keep getting stuck in inherited patterns and expectations -

The Messiah will be a traditional king with an army.

Respect goes to people with physical and economic power.

Their adherence to old ways of thinking makes it hard for them to “get” who Jesus is, what his mission entails, and what he is trying to teach them. And I’d like to say that’s kind of sad - them not getting it when they’ve got Jesus RIGHT THERE. But really it’s very human and not unusual at all. We all do that - even with 4 Gospels and 2000 years of history to look at, we don’t get it much better than they did.

But you know what? One thing I see in this story is not just the lesson Jesus is trying to teach. I also see the journey. This group commits to staying together listening, following Jesus even when they don’t completely understand what he is up to. They are a community of faithful companions.

So, for instance, these disciples have seen Jesus heal the sick and preach in the synagogue. They’ve heard him teach large crowds and confront religious authorities. He has stood by people that were rejected by the wider community.

And still they argue about which one of them is the greatest.

Instead of calling them stupid and looking for a better team, Jesus does what he always does. He tries teaching the lesson another way. He tells them they will meet God in other people - especially insignificant people.

In fact - ironically - God has already met THEM on this journey and they are not all that significant. They don’t have much power in their synagogues or in the empire. In some ways they are nobodies. The theologian Willie James Jennings describes the disciples as “twelve men, none with exceptional credentials, no fabulous educational pedigrees, none with reservoirs of immense cultural capital to draw from.”

But to Jesus they are beloved. Not only are they beloved, so are all the other powerless people drawn to Jesus. People who can’t give money, or do favors, or help shore up anyone’s power. If the disciples - if we - can love someone who can only be themselves and not elevate us, then they and we will experience the way that God loves us.

Because in relation to God, who among us has any power or privilege? We are all like that little child or that servant at the table.

It’s hard to think about this journey of the disciples and Jesus without thinking about our own journeys in life. Many of them literal travels, some of them intellectual, emotional, and

spiritual journeys. These journeys can take us away from home and back home. They can be tiring and difficult, but also refreshing and illuminating.

Most journeys require commitment and patience. Patience with inevitable changes in course, with those accompanying us, with the path, the weather, the inability to see far enough ahead.

If you've even been on a journey with other people - a hike or a road trip, for instance - you know that the experience can simultaneously fracture and build community.

Are we stopping on the way? Where and why?

Are we really going that far? No one packed the food I like!

Are we there yet?

On a journey with other people, some will inevitably not understand the goal of the trip or why we are all on it together. The disciples illustrate that well for us! And yet, the disciples stayed on the journey with Jesus and with each other.

And so do we. The truth of Jesus is hard to understand, even when you think you get it there is still more to know. But Jesus is with us on that journey to understanding. If we don't get the lesson, he steps back with us to learn an easier lesson. As long as we stay on the journey with Jesus, we will learn and grow closer to God.

We humans are uncomfortable with not knowing, with instability in our daily lives. That's hard when it comes to spiritual truths. It takes trial and error. It takes sticking together.

You have all journeyed with each other through a lot - and I am privileged to travel with you on those journeys. We've walked together through grief and loss, through birth and adoption. We've circled around to graduations and new jobs, to weddings and divorces. Sometimes we've literally walked golf courses and sailed in the sea together.

You probably already know this, but I will tell you anyway - Jesus is with you on all those journeys, just as he was with the disciples. And if you travel with Jesus long enough, you may begin to understand what he is teaching. Some of the lessons are hard - they take patience to learn, years to learn, sometimes generations to learn.

One thing we know about traveling with Jesus though, is that the journey itself is important. No matter what you do or don't understand about Jesus, he will travel with you toward the truth as long as you will have him. Along the way, you will be in the company of other travelers like you who learn to see in each other and in themselves what Jesus sees - a community of faithful companions.

AMEN