

Stumbling After Jesus – September 27, 2015

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In many ways we are not unlike the early followers of Jesus. They had questions, and so do we, about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Are we supposed to live a certain way? How are we supposed to relate to one another? How do we function in society and the greater world around us? These questions are especially important to us in this generation as we live in a pluralistic world. Christianity is no longer part of the mainstream of society. There are many different faith systems, including secularism, in our society and world. We aren't always sure how to act out our Christian faith in our daily lives. As we come to this point in Mark's gospel the followers of Jesus were still unsure of their specific roles and what it meant to be a follower of Jesus.

Last week in our text, the disciples had been arguing about which of them would be greatest in the coming kingdom of God. Jesus responded by saying, "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then Jesus took a little child, saying "whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me." The disciples still didn't understand. To them, the kingdom of God was about power, not service. About glory, not weakness and humility. In our lesson for today Jesus lays out several principles of what it means to be a disciple.

The passage from Mark begins with a comment from John. He says to Jesus, "Teacher, we spotted this fellow casting out demons using your name. Since he was not one of us, we attempted to stop him." Exorcism was a big deal during this time period. It was the common belief that many illnesses and mental conditions were caused by demon possession; as such, exorcists were in constant demand.

The disciples were put off by this rogue exorcist using the name of Jesus in his work. Believing they had a monopoly on Jesus' name, they tried to stop him. The problem was, John was upset because someone outside their group was using the name of Jesus. And I can imagine Jesus sighing with exasperation and responding, "Don't stop him. Is God's work being done? If he's helping people, he's on our side." The problems here are exclusivity and intolerance. This man is not one of us, so he has no right to be using Jesus' name in this manner. He's not part of the "in" crowd, thus he needs to be silenced. The disciples were trying to hold on to Jesus like a petulant child selfishly grasping his favorite toy.

Friends, our world is divided. Christianity is divided. Politics is divided. And it seems like the divisions are getting wider. The other day someone asked me if I had watched the presidential hopefuls' debate. I didn't. I couldn't. The hatred, the mistrust, the half-truths and blatant lies, the spin – I can't stomach it.

Many of you have probably heard about the issue in Eastern Kentucky where the county clerk refused to give out marriage licenses to gay couples. You might think, well, Eastern Kentucky – a bunch of inbred hicks. Okay – maybe you're not really thinking that. But I know that town. I went to college there. I taught in the high school there. I lived in Rowan County for six years. It's a diverse and welcoming community. The Baptists are even progressive. And there's a thriving gay community. I

still have many friends in that area. So in the heat of the controversy, one of my college professors was posting information about what was going on – I had the inside scoop.

So county clerk Kim Davis decided that she would refuse to give marriage licenses to gay couples. She also forbade her deputy clerks from giving them out, as Mrs. Davis' name was on the license, and that would be guilt by association. Mrs. Davis believes that homosexuality is a sin. And she felt that a license being issued was condoning that sin, and thus was also a sin. She believed that she would be found culpable by God.

I can't entirely fault the woman for her bad theology. She believes her convictions. She also believes that she can't do her job without sinning against God. But her convictions were impinging on the civil rights of couples seeking a marriage license. If she feels that strongly about it, she can always step down as county clerk.

What I take issue with, is that suddenly the extremists flocked to Rowan County and used Kim Davis as a photo op. And in short order it turned into a media circus. Protesters gathered with their hand painted signs and their vitriolic slogans. Mrs. Davis became a pawn in a larger scheme, fueled by special interest groups, to sow discord and hatred. She is the current poster child in the alleged war against Christianity. When emotions run high, rational discourse becomes impossible.

My professor posted photos on Facebook of young children on the courthouse lawn holding up signs spewing hatred against gay people. How is that different from a Middle Eastern child burning an effigy of the American president? Or a child in Alabama proudly waving a Confederate flag? Kids aren't born to hate others. Hatred is learned.

So going back to the story in Mark, let say that instead of an exorcist healing people, John came up to Jesus and said, "Hey Jesus, that county clerk over there is using your name to deny people their civil rights. We tried to stop her, but her cronies shoed us away."

How do you think Jesus would have responded? Is God's work being done? When we look at the stories about Jesus, does he exclude people who live on the margins or does he include them? Does he tell his followers to shun people who are different? Does he encourage people to argue and hurl insults at people who may or may not be sinning? Does he encourage extremism or division? Or are we to love all people and pray for our enemies?

In this same passage Jesus warns his disciples about stumbling blocks. The disciples are cautioned against leading younger or less mature Christians astray.

How we live out our lives is crucial, because we can unwittingly cause someone else to stumble or turn away from Christ. Do others see us as people with unforgiving spirits? Do we act dishonestly? Do we engage in malicious gossip or tell inappropriate jokes? We are accountable for what we do. Do our actions lead others to Christ or away from Christ? Do we support divisiveness or encourage reconciliation?

A few days ago the Moderator of the PC(USA) issued a call to action. Heath Rada is an elected official. He was elected at the last General Assembly to serve as our leader. Now, the moderator doesn't have any particular power to make policy or tell people what to do, but as he has traveled this past year and has spoken to Presbyterians all over, he has heard a constant theme. There is a desire to work together, to end division among us.

It is evident that the church is changing, and the church of the future will look different than how it is now. If we are to change with it, we cannot continue to allow ourselves to be defined by what divides us. When we focus on matters of disagreement, we neglect to fulfill the mission of the church. Are we so concerned with theology and doctrine, and who's right and who's wrong, that we neglect to offer the cold cup of water to the person who is parched? Can we agree to disagree and move forward to the work of the church – the work of Christ in the world?

Additionally, we cannot continue to allow one side to define Christianity. The voices like the ones coming out of a tiny segment of Eastern Kentucky are the voices of hate and intolerance. They proselytize a God who is wrathful and stern. They evangelize a message of conformity and elitism. They delight in division and mistrust. And they serve as stumbling blocks to the people of the world who don't know Christ as we do. Those of us who know a God of mercy and love have a tendency to keep silent, hoping the extremists will eventually go away. We hide our identity as Christians because we don't want to be associated with the fundamentalists. We're afraid to show that there is a different way. A better way. And then we wonder why people prefer to be spiritual and not religious.

Maybe this is why Pope Francis is so popular among so many people, not just Catholics. He would rather eat with the homeless people in Washington than members of Congress. He'd rather hug a child than shake the hand of a dignitary. He puts the words of Christ into action. He is not afraid to speak the gospel. His is a voice of authenticity. He sees the divisions in our world, and he challenges us to reconciliation. He sees a world full of people in need – who need food, shelter, safety – and he calls us to mission. He is not afraid to call people to task. He is not afraid to point out our flaws and where we fall short. And even the voices of opposition tend to back down a little when Francis speaks, because he does so with a voice of kindness and humility. He speaks the truth in love. Much like Jesus did.

We're all trying our best to follow Jesus. And we're not the most graceful of followers, we stumble along, trying to get it right. Divisions threaten us, and we get sidetracked by minutiae. We hide our identity, because we don't want to be labeled "one of them." We cringe at the thought of conflict. It's not easy, it's never easy. But together we can work toward unity and reconciliation. Let us boldly proclaim Christ and show the world what following him really means.