

Sermon: Walk in Love

Scripture: Ephesians 5

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Did you know that before Christianity was called Christianity, the earliest followers of Jesus referred to themselves as The Way. It was not initially a different religion from Judaism as much as it was a way of life, a way of living, a way of being in the world. Followers of The Way. It probably derived from Jesus saying “I am the way, the truth and the life”. He never said I am starting a new religion and this is what you must believe in order to be a part of it. He said “I am the way, follow me.”

And they began walking.

He called them off of their boats and out of their tax collecting booths and out of their homes and from their sedentary day to day lives of getting by in a tough land of occupation and control and he had them walk with him. You read it throughout the Gospels, that Jesus is always walking from this town to that town, from this land to that land, to and from the holy city Jerusalem. He could have sat still and waited for people to come to him, but he didn't, he walked. And more than a few times his healing acts were to make someone who couldn't walk, walk again and others who were bed-ridden, he raised them up and some of them walked right along beside him.

Jesus was somewhat dismissive of the structures of religious observance - as his disciples gawked at the massive temple in Jerusalem, he says “eh, tear it down and I'll raise it up in three days.” Remember when Peter wants to build structures on the mountaintop to commemorate Jesus

and where he met Moses and Elijah, God is like “stop it Peter, just listen and follow” and Jesus, saying not a word, walked on down the mountain as Peter James and John stumbled along behind him. It was a walking faith early on, this faith of ours, a movement, a journey, a pilgrimage and there was reluctance to make it static with buildings and structures. The new temple, early Christians described, was utterly mobile and fluid, the new temple of God’s Holy Spirit was our bodies, the body of the gathered church where Christ dwelt and which dwelt in Christ, wherever they were.

That’s one of the things about a walking faith instead of a stationary faith, you carry it wherever you go. You don’t go to it, it goes with you. And there are other things that distinguish a walking faith from a fixed faith. A walking faith puts us at the mercy of others. Jesus told his disciples to go out and preach the Gospel and to carry not food or clothes so that they would be dependent upon those they encountered, to quite literally be at their mercy. This meant accepting the occasional hostility that was directed to them, for sure, but it also meant receiving humbly the graciousness and generosity that would be bestowed upon them. They had this incredible good news of God’s love to share with the world but the way Jesus structured it was that they were to share it from a state of vulnerability and not from a place of power. The walking faith required humility of them and dependence upon others. If they had built a big structure to house the teachings and practices of Jesus and called themselves The Place, instead of The Way, they would be keepers of the place and could much more easily maintain control and be the deciders and create insiders and outsiders and the place might become all important instead of what the place was built for. Jesus didn’t build a church, Jesus forged a way.

A walking faith not only makes its followers vulnerable and dependent upon other people, and keeps them humble, but a walking faith also encourages a dependence upon God for next steps and decisions. Like I spoke about this last week, one of the greatest things about the Hildegard Pilgrimage that Tracy and I did - these 90 miles of walking in a strange country where we didn't speak the language - was that we had to trust the signs, trust that we would be guided and directed to where we needed to be. A walking faith works this way as well, it requires more dependence on listening and looking for the signs of God and what God is asking of us and when, an attitude that's harder to maintain in a more stationary faith where the structures, rules, and boundaries are set and determined. It's easier to believe we are the captains of our own destiny and that it's all up to us than when we are walking, journeying, moving and wondering where the next right steps are.

Another benefit of a walking faith rather than a stationary faith is that it is influenced, informed, shaped by encounters with others where the others, even those of other faith traditions or none at all enrich us and teach us to fill our and deepen our own faith walk. So a Roman centurion catches up with Jesus and the disciples as they are walking along and says "Lord, I'm not worthy to receive you in my house, but only say the word and my servant shall be healed" and Jesus is like "woah! I have not experienced faith like this in all of Israel!" Look at his faith, disciples of mine! And the bleeding woman reaches out as Jesus walks by and touches the hem of his garment and is healed and Jesus says "your faith has healed you." And that famous story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman who asks for healing for her daughter she ends up schooling Jesus about his exclusivity and teaches him a thing or two about his mission and his

purpose. You see in a walking faith there are no gate keepers or door men to keep such riff-raff out of The Place rather there is a fluid, open, who-knows-what-comes-next-and-how-will-it-change-us Way that is critical to following God's way.

And then of course a walking faith necessarily is a spreading out kind of faith. The Christian faith, the way of Jesus is necessarily missional, it's got to involve a moving outward and serving the world and preaching the good news. Built into the faith is that others matter and in fact the others who mostly don't matter to society are particularly important to matter in this walking faith. Jesus makes that clear. It's not "a leave no trace" mentality as you go, it's leave as much a trace as possible as long as it's a trace that blesses and does not curse.

There's a line from Psalm 84 that names it well that Tracy and I sang along our pilgrimage route in Germany which goes like this –

O Lord God almighty blessed are those who trust in You. Blessed are those whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. As they go through dry land they make it a place of Springs.

That's what Jesus wanted of his disciples, that's what Jesus wants of our lives, that as we go through dry, cracked, chaotic, troubled, violent lands we help to bring forth springs of goodness and light, of peace and justice, of love: *O Lord God almighty blessed are those who trust in You. Blessed are those whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. As they go through dry land they make it a place of Springs.*

"Walk in love, walk in the way of love" Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians. And talk about someone who walked the faith. He talked a lot too but certainly walked the talk, the Apostle Paul did. It is estimated that Paul walked over 10,000 in his missionary journeys throughout the

Mediterranean world. And I was proud that Tracy and I walked close to 100. So Paul knew a thing or two about walking in the faith as he wrote “Walk in love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

It's not just any ole walking faith, but it's a faith directed by walking in the way of Jesus which is the way of love. And this of course is the theme of our pledge drive, our stewardship campaign as we rally around one another and encourage one another to contribute our financial resources to this church... which even here in this stationary place, we know that church is more a way than a place. We realized in a big way during the pandemic that we were still church though we weren't in this building. And Roots and Branches - our small group gatherings - realize as they meet that they are still church whether they are meeting in someone's home or on-line or in a room here. The church is of course more than a building and we have to be careful and intentional about not allowing the place of the building to determine the trajectory of our faith, cause our faith is moving, mobile, walking faith that is going somewhere. There are incredible gifts that the building of our church offers us like space for gathering and praying and developing ourselves and supporting one another but the point of it is so that we can increase and make better our walk in love.

This is why it's so important what Open Doors is doing - it's noting that the building for all its beauty and what it allows us, is an outsized, under-maintained, unsustainable aspect of our being church and so we are getting serious about how the building can better serve our walking-in-love faith and not be a burden to it. There can be a burden in The Place that will hinder The Way of our faith if we are not careful and we are determined to make some decisions and take some actions that release us better into the

walk of faith while still maintaining what is so important this house of prayer, this place of gathering, this place we can come to then strengthen our faith for the living of it out beyond these walls.

As you'll read in the letter that you'll get in the mail in the next few days, I am convinced that now more than ever the world, our country, this town, needs the church, a place and a community of people walking in love, noting those in need around us and considering how we can be of service, how we can leave behind us in our wake springs of new life and care and healing. The world needs places of prayer like this and quiet where the ancient wisdom can seep into the dry cracked ground of the modern techno world.

I hope you experience this church and the way we are walking together as a fertile and vital way that you want to support and strengthen and that you'll consider making a pledge of financial commitment to the church, however large or small that might be as a way of saying I want the way we are as a church to accompany me on my way and to help make a way for the wider community to remember how love is at the center of it all. Walk with me. Walk in love in a world of division and hurt and anxiety and let's see what springs can burst forth in Christ's spirit of love and mercy.

Ultimately it's a walk home that we are talking about, isn't it? Built into our psyches, into our very DNA from the outset of our being human is a need for an ultimate return home, home to Eden, to paradise, to God, where finally we will have arrived and be at peace after all this walking. As the choir sings "The Road Home" the deacons will collect the offering. Let us give to the work and ministries of the church in JEsus' name, amen.