

On The Road Again March 30, 2008

You may not have noticed, but over the week prior to Easter, we used the image of a road as our connecting thread. Palm Sunday we talked about a Road to Nowhere, and Good Friday, it was “Crossroads.” Last Sunday, on Easter, we talked about “A New Road.” So today, it seemed sort of fitting that we continue that theme with “On the Road Again.”

I can't hear that collection of words without thinking about the Willie Nelson song that came out sometime in the 70's by that very title. “On the road again, just can't wait to get on the road again...all my life is making music with my friends, so I can't wait to get on the road again...” That's how it began.

Frankly, that's part of the reason I think it's so fitting, because since this is the week after Easter, there's a very real sense in which we are “on the road again.” I'm aware that some are literally on their way to Florida or somewhere else warm and sunny for spring break, while the rest of us are on the road to work as usual, or going about our regular daily tasks. In the midst of the usual, it's pretty easy for us to forget about what we talked about and, hopefully, experienced with Easter. It can just seem like business as usual.

However, if Easter has in any way really gotten under our skin and into our souls, it's a little hard for us to just continue in the same old ways. Something has to be different, just as things were a bit different for those in the circle of friends closest to Jesus. We have segments of 2 Bible passages this morning, actually versions from different writers, as to what it was like to hit the road again after what they had experienced in Jerusalem on that first Easter morning.

In Luke's writings in the Acts of the Apostles, we're told that the 11 remaining disciples and all the others who traveled with them, went down the road from the Mount of Olives and gathered together again in an upper room, and there, we're told, “**They agreed they were in this for good...**” The writer of Matthew's Gospel has the eleven disciples, and I'm assuming the rest of the group, headed up the road north to Galilee to a mountain where Godly things seemed to occur. They were on the way to get renewed and directed. Once there, they experienced

Jesus saying to them, “**Go out and train everyone you meet, near and far, in this way of life...**”

Clearly they were in this together, and for good, and they knew that they were going to have to be on the road again, because they believed they were told to help people understand what it was like to live “this way of life.” I believe they were meant to share the experiences they had, not so much in words, although those are important, but more by modeling for others “this way of life”—what it meant to live more the kind of life that Jesus lived. They were to keep moving to spread the example of God's love for everyone.

Frankly, it seems to me that that message wasn't just for those 11 or 20 or 50 who happened to be gathered back then, but for everyone who's ever heard since. What does it mean for you and for me to be so changed that we are willing to live and model “This way of life?” What, in fact, does “this way of life” look like?

My guess is that part of the reason we wrestle with this is that the Christian faith as we now know it has strayed pretty far from the way of life Jesus lived and had in mind for us to live. In fact, I'm just reading a book by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons entitled *unchristian*. The basic premise of the book seems to be that Christianity is no longer as Jesus intended to the point that it may really be more “unchristian” than Christian.

The research used to document this premise came from countless interviews and hours of study with younger adults, particularly those outside of Christianity. It states that young adults “**have little trust in the Christian faith, and esteem for the lifestyle of Christ followers is quickly fading among outsiders. They admit their emotional and intellectual barriers go up when they are around Christians, and they reject Jesus because they feel rejected by Christians.**”

Why might they sense rejection? Namely, they say, because Christians are best known for what they're against. They are perceived as being judgmental, anti-homosexual and too political. From my perspective, it's easy to see how listening to those who have the loudest voices among Christians can cause someone to arrive at those perceptions.

However, is that what the Christian faith was meant to be? Is that what Jesus lived? If the disciples were truly changed into

new beings, is that what they modeled? Is that the way of life that they were commissioned to live? Is that the way Jesus would want us to live our lives? I don't think so.

I believe transformation looks far different from that. It's more like a story that Len Sweet tells in his book, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*. It's a story about a tough, relatively "uncultured" man who fell in love with a beautiful vase that was in a shop window. On the way to work each day, he would stop and stare, totally mesmerized by the unique colors of the glass. Finally he gathered enough courage to ask about the vase, and when he did, he discovered that it was a rare, signed and dated, "Galle 1900" cameo vase.

Not being much of a glass or antique connoisseur, I had to do a little research to learn about this item. Apparently, it was a creation of a French artist, Emile Galle, who worked primarily in glass, and who was a major force in the French Art Nouveau movement. At any rate, what it meant was that this vase, in the form of a red onion with a removable green stopped shaped like a leaf on a stem, was a very expensive vase. In fact, the cost was equal to two months of the admirer's salary.

Learning that took his breath away.

However, for whatever reason, he was totally taken by the vase, and arranged a layaway plan to make payments over time. After six months, he had paid enough to be able to put the balance on his credit card.

He brought the vase home, and put it high on the mantel in his living room. There it was, that beautiful vase, making everything else in the room appear dim and dingy by comparison. The man found that he had to keep the room immaculately clean just so it could be worthy of housing the vase. The curtains that once hung at the windows had to be replaced; and the couch he had once loved no longer seemed acceptable. The lighting in the room didn't do the vase justice, so he purchased new lighting fixtures to enhance the beauty of the vase. Then it became evident that, not only that room, but his entire house, needed a complete makeover. Slowly, but surely, the whole house was transformed, coming closer to the beauty of that vase.

The beauty of that vase transformed the house in much the same way that God's love transformed the disciples. That's what

Easter is about—God's love transforming our lives even today. That transformation experience wasn't just a one-time thing for the disciples, nor is it for us; It is a daily experience that.

It means that our lives will change in the glow of God's love, just like that room that changed to house a beautiful vase. And it's not because we're admonished that we ought to change, or told how rotten we are that we have no choice but to change. It's because our hearts change, and we genuinely want our lives to be different. That's how God's love works. So, what does that look like? What might be changed about the way we live?

I've used this analogy before, and I can only speak from my own experience, but after years of being in church and participating in church activities, my life began to change, slowly but surely, when God's love became real. It became more than a matter of going through the motions; and it had everything to do with relationship—with God, with others.

I've often said that it was like looking through a different set of eyes upon my own life, my values, my priorities, and it also involved looking at the world around me in an entirely new way. Now it wasn't a dramatic, overnight kind of thing, but a gradual turning, a gradual change that indicated I wasn't in the same place I had been previously. Things were different; no, that's not true—I was different, and I was seeing differently.

I believe that, when we see things differently, we begin to act differently. When we are changed, we change the way we think and feel and act. Episcopal priest and writer Tom Ehrich, in a column in the *Star* a few months ago, said that we need transformation in order to better ourselves and our communities. On a practical, personal level, what might that look like?

Well, transformation might look like being a less self-serving, selfish person. It might look like forgiving more willingly, or demonstrating love more readily. It might mean that our ideas about what's important are changed, and that our behavior follows our new set of priorities. I suppose there are some for whom living the kind of life Jesus lived looks like being involved in mission work, helping others, attending church regularly, and supporting vital ministry with our financial resources and time and energy.

But it shows up sometimes in the small things, in the less-noticeable, but still

significant things. Not too long ago, someone told me about how a significant person in her life had changed dramatically because of God's love. The person in question had been rather opinionated, harsh, angry, impatient, and a very difficult person with whom to relate. But God's love took hold, and slowly but surely, change began to happen. The hard edges softened; more patience emerged; anger dissipated and genuine care and friendliness became the reality. That was transformation.

I believe that transformation happens when we become a better, more attentive parent to our children. It happens when we become a more honest and ethical worker who, in spite of the challenges of our workplace, takes the high road and does our work in the best way possible. It happens when we honor our friends and show our care and concern for them, instead of always wondering what they can do for us.

Sometimes transformation means our minds are changed when it comes to wealth, status or prestige. Maybe we find those we admire are no longer the rich and famous, the idols and heroes. Instead, maybe we find ourselves more respectful of the regular person doing an ordinary day's work to earn a minimal dollar. Maybe transformation means that we see some of our previously held beliefs and convictions as inadequate, or maybe even unjust. Maybe it means that we do our part to work for a more just and loving community and world.

I can't name what transformation looks like for you any more than you can define it for me, but I do know one thing: when we allow God's love to invade our hearts, minds and spirits, nothing stays the same. I believe that's what it's like to live what Jesus called "this way of life"—a life of faith.

Closing:

In the Tom Ehrich column that I mentioned earlier, he writes, "The point is always change or transformation. We become a new creation, and the world around us is the better for it."

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that God's Easter work continues in each one of us, and that the world is the better for it.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.