

On the Emmaus Road April 30, 2017

Every now and then a certain phrase from a sermon I've heard will stick with me, bouncing around in my mind for days, weeks or sometimes even longer. I wish it was more often that I held onto the gems of knowledge that I hear in a sermon, but admittedly it's only now and then that a phrase really sticks with me.

One of these phrases I heard was from a sermon from Garth Ewert Fisher a few weeks ago on palm Sunday at Josh Wallace's ordination. I could tell the sermon was a good one, thoughtful and full of intelligent nuggets of truth, but I mostly was trying to keep 3 children hushed and occupied with colouring books and toys to hold them through the second church service of the day with the only break from church being a 2 hour ride in the car being strapped into their seats. They were restless to say the least. Despite our busy back row bench, a few words did still reach my ears and stuck there, leaving me pondering why those words stuck me.

The quote was from a book, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott writes, "I don't have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion. I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection [right from Palm Sunday to Easter]. In fact, I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday School, who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the tomb; everlasting life and a basketful of chocolates. Now you're talking" (p.140).

Hmmm. I thought. I really like Good Friday. I like the darkness, the solemnness, the rituals of seeing a cross carried across town, especially in the rain, the quiet scripture reading, leaving worship in silence.

Sometimes I actually think that we skip ahead too fast to the resurrection. We are so eager to get the end of the story, where victory is had, where we are back on the winning team, "take that death", that we unintentionally belittle what had just happened, we demean the sacrifice that was made by Jesus.

We are Easter people but we live in a Good Friday kind of world.

Road to Emmaus

The scripture today, which I took from the lectionary, brings us back into the Easter weekend. Good Friday has happened, although it didn't seem so good to the disciples. Two of Jesus' followers are heading back home, out of Jerusalem, with heavy hearts. They begin the 7 mile journey, a walk they were accustomed to in a time when travel was nearly always the speed your feet could take you. But this time, the path they were walking was vastly longer and more

difficult -- it was a walk of hopes in shambles. It was a walk taken through the valley of disillusionment. It was a walk burdened with perhaps accusation or shame.

And as they walked with heavy hearts and feet they discussed. They discussed intensely it says. You can imagine the kind of talk they had. After their friend and leader was unjustly and abruptly executed. A man at the peak of his career, the peak of his influence, a man who was the hope to redeem Israel. Discussing what had just happened, how it happened and who was to blame.

Then a stranger comes along. We all know who it is -it's Jesus, but they don't. And this stranger asks them "what are you talking about?"

-"Are you the only one in Jerusalem who doesn't know what's been going on? Have you been living under a rock? How do you not know?"

-But Jesus ask them "tell me" he says. And they do.

Jesus plays the roll like a therapist here. A detached stranger, an "uninitiated" and "neutral" party that must be introduced to the dimensions of the problem and allows the "patients" in this case to name the bare bones of their struggle and disclose their disappointment and perhaps deep sickness.

"WE HAD HOPED..." they say

"WE HAD HOPED..." The past tense of hope.

Hope is a verb that keeps us looking forward, it helps us, encourages us. We like to refer to hope in the future tense. We like it when bereaved families say that everything will be okay, that they will go on, that they will get everything back to normal. We like future tenses so much that we reward people in deep grief for reassuring us that the sun will rise tomorrow and that life will go on.

But in this unguarded moment, the walking disciples give voice to a discovery that every adult shares: very often, often when it matters most, we find ourselves speaking of matters of hope (and faith) in the imperfect tense: WE HAD HOPED ...

Time had passed and there was no change, no resurrection, no Jesus.

We too "outgrow" our hopes or become more realistic and we no longer expect anything real to happen. We know the stories. We've heard the biblical word. Like the disciples, we do not recognize what is right in front of us. We are lost in hopelessness.

Let's not rush off to the end of the story too soon. There is some huge disappointment here. Some of you have experienced that feeling when you HAD hoped. You had hoped they would get better, you had hoped you would never have to do this, you had hoped... What to do when the hope is gone, when it becomes past tense.

I heard a quote yesterday, at the RRR workshop, that Everyone wants to be on the mountain top... but we in the valley is where the fertilizer* is.

One thing I like about this story, is that only one of the characters is named. Cleopas answers Jesus' questions but the other traveller is not named. They have no speaking role. They have no description. And the thing about that unnamed disciple is that it's blankness invites you to fill that role. The lack of description allows us to jump into that discussion with Cleopas and Jesus the stranger. (the other could be Cleopas' wife...).

Jesus asks these two to tell him about his own story. Remember that they were walking a few miles with this man, so they had to have said more than the few sentences recorded here. They would have told the stranger about who Jesus was, what he did, and why he was put to death. Then together Jesus goes through all the scriptures beginning with Moses and the prophets, it says, and explains what the scriptures say concerning himself.

How would we have summarized the life of Jesus before we knew of the resurrection? What would we have included as important? What would we have left out? What truths would we have spoken about? What would have stuck out as the most important things that Jesus stood for? I would have liked to hear how they described Jesus. I wonder if Jesus would have been pleased with how he was being described and remembered?

The story continues. The 2 travellers get to where they are going by evening, and persuade Jesus not to carry on alone in the dark. It's evening and dangerous out there for a man to be travelling alone. Stay here with us. And then once Jesus sits down with them and breaks bread with them, then their eyes are opened and they recognize the stranger for who he is -Jesus. And then he's gone.

And instead of being dumbstruck by what they just experienced, instead of going home or to bed to let this moment sink in, they get up immediately. They had just told Jesus that it was too late and dark to travel on the roads, but they disregard their own advice and run back to Jerusalem. They backtrack those 7 miles they just finished walking with speed and joy in their

steps. It must be the middle of the night by the time they get back to the city, but they find the other disciples also up. Obviously this is all too exciting for anyone to sleep.

The resurrection was only necessary because of the huge disappointment that came first.

When we were discussing the Easter story at Girls club a few weeks ago, one of them asked "why did they have to kill him? He obviously didn't do anything wrong. could they just do that to someone they didn't like?"

This is one of the reasons that I love girls club. I get a thrill out of connecting with the kids over a story, a lesson or scripture. I love to see that "light bulb" go on, to see them question things, to try to grapple with the truths or mistruths put forth before them.

Why did they have to kill him? Most of the girls that come to clubs don't attend church with their families on a regular basis. They do not hear these stories over and over. They are able to listen with fresh ears and question things that for those of us who have grown up with these stories seem ordinary.

Yes, Jesus committed no crime, yet what he did was costly. He challenged all the norms. He challenged the temple, the church leaders, the government officials. He challenged the wealthy and the powerful. He challenged the Scriptures and the cultural norms, rules and taboo's.

People felt threatened. They did not want to change their ways. They did not want to give up power or wealth or status, which might happen if they honestly choose to listen to this Jesus character.

It is hard to have your values challenged, even ones that you thought were based on good, wholesome and Godly ideals. That was hard to hear then, and still is hard to hear today. When I hear the verse about how it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than a camel to go through the eye of a needle, I cringe. You can't actually mean that. I'm a good person, I tithe, I volunteer, I try to put your will before my own. But compared to most of the world, I am rich, we all are here. You can't mean me? You can't mean us, right?

So if we were on the road to Emmaus and were asked "tell me about this Jesus of yours, what does he want you to do?"

The answer to that, in it's simplest form, is two words: FOLLOW ME.

Jesus' central command was follow me.

Easier said than done, and we could spend the rest of the year discussing what it means to follow him.

This winter during our weekly girls club lessons, we have been going through a series called Kids Live Upside-down. Each week we pick a new topic of where what the world tells us to do something different than what Jesus tells us.

- We have talked about disregarding our social status by being friends with the outcasts, like Jesus did with the lepers.
- We have talked about not worrying about possessions, like the lilies of the field, and trusting in God.
- We have talked about giving generously and humbly like the widow and her last coin.
- We have talked about non-violence and bullying, and what it means to turn the other cheek.

Christ's command was to follow him. Simple complete obedience. Many of us and many others throughout history, even many theologians and ethicists, have found creative ways out of obeying the obvious meaning of the teachings of Jesus. You can't really mean me? That can't really mean for everyone?

Jesus tells us to choose him over our family. Are we willing to disagree with our family, our parents, our spouse to wrestle with the cost of discipleship?

And what about our possessions? We don't really need to give them all up? right? maybe just downsize a little, live simply, do without sometimes. I feel like this one is really hard for us in Western culture to grapple with. Western culture teaches us to value stuff, even to the detriment of relationships. Just look at the amount of space and money devoted to storing stuff that won't fit into our homes.

I read an article that states that in the US there is nearly 7 square feet of storage space outside the home being used for every man, woman and child in the country. Storage rental space is the fastest growing sector of commercial real estate. And by the time people remove their things from storage they have often paid 3, 4, 5 times the value of what those items are worth.

Think about the huge edifices and shrines dedicated to consumer culture (malls, big box stores, factory outlets) and the concept of "retail therapy" as an antidote to almost anything. (...example: scc meeting...) And here we have Jesus telling us to give it all up. Jesus would probably just roll his eyes, at how much stuff we think we need.

There are difficult things Jesus call us to do. Some are hard for us today but other ones would have been really hard to those around him in that time. He disrupted the ideas about who is clean and who is unclean. He disrupted the rules about what and who could eat together,

associate together, worship together. These ones don't seem as radical today, but they would have been life shaking then.

But with all of his many teaching, there is one thing central to the life of discipleship. Nothing—nothing at all—must come between us and our relationship with Christ. (Love the lord your god with all your heart, mind, soul...) Nothing should stand in the way of following his command to love God with everything we have and our neighbour as ourselves—not money, not stuff, not politics, and not family values. Following Jesus is a way of life that demands everything of us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as many of you are familiar with, was a German theologian during the world wars. DB was executed by the Nazis at a Concentration Camp, just two weeks before World War 2 would end.

Brilliant scholar – teaching at U. of Berlin by age 24.

Bonhoeffer's promising academic and ecclesiastical career was dramatically altered with Nazi ascension to power in January 1933. He was a determined opponent of the regime from its first days. Two days after Hitler was installed as Chancellor, Bonhoeffer delivered a radio address in which he attacked Hitler and warned Germany against slipping into an idolatrous cult of following Hitler. He was cut off the air in mid-sentence.

Stripped of his teaching position, Bonhoeffer founded an illegal, underground seminary. And in 1937, just 31 years old, he wrote his most well known book – The Cost of Discipleship.

Bonhoeffer is not willing to separate the concepts of faith and works; they are of their very nature intertwined. This does not mean that we are saved through obedience – we are still saved through faith – but discipleship is an essential part of faith. Belief and action, Bonhoeffer said, are inseparable: 'Only the believers obey and only the obedient believe.'

We can not just believe in the resurrection, we also have to act as Christ did.

Let me give you an example: Suppose I am lost in the woods, and I see somebody who looks like they are experienced in the area. I logically ask him for help getting out. He gives me instructions. I say that I trust him and ask him to lead the way out. He begins to move and I stay there. We all accept that this is ridiculous; if I actually trust him, I'd follow him. Yet that is precisely what many Christians do, claiming that they have faith and thus don't need to follow Jesus.

If Jesus' example and teaching showed one thing, we have no excuse to believe we should be doing something else.

The work of following Christ was not something just given to the first disciples, but was meant for all disciples for all time.

And finally, Jesus' example and teaching means that we may not be popular, or accepted by the world around us. Jesus warned us that the way of following him will not be easy, and will include suffering, will include rejection.

Jesus' own rejection by the world was so virulent, he was tried and executed in less than a week from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The truth Jesus spoke was too true for them to hear.

Look at some of the other people over history that have spoken truth to the world's injustice or to the world's power. DB for one was killed by the Nazi's.

-Martin Luther King, who spoke truth to political and social views of equality and non-violence. He was assassinated.

- Archbishop Oscar Romero, spoke truth in El Salvador. He spoke out against poverty, social injustice, assassinations and torture and was also assassinated.

-Mahatma Gandhi, although not from a Christian perspective, he spoke divine truths about power, non-violence and oppression. He too was assassinated.

In 1998, Ten 20th century Christian martyrs were commemorated with statues at Westminster Abbey in London. The niches above the west gate had been empty since the Middle Ages. Statues of Bonhoeffer, ML King, Oscar Romero and 7 others now reside there.

Following Christ is costly! It was costly for Jesus, and if we take it seriously, it is costly for us too.

So if we were on that road to Emmaus, how would we summarize Jesus' life? What would we say were his lessons for us? What would we do next?

So here is my challenge for you: what are Jesus' lessons that you find hard to take? Which ones do you find yourself looking for ways out of, ways to dodge the level of commitment, ways to make it not apply to you?

Take that/those lesson(s) and sit with them. Ask the hard questions. and be willing to go to places that are tough and dark and difficult. Think about them, pray about them, read about them, study them. In our earnest searching God will find us. He will lead us. He will give us the strength to rely on Jesus, to follow Jesus, to walk against the grain of the world.

If we can open this conversation in our lives and allow ourselves to wrestle openly and honestly with what it means to carry the cross, then maybe, just maybe, we can release (fists) our need to be in control and instead lean on Jesus to guide our steps. It will mean taking some huge risks, it will mean expecting more of ourselves and others, and it will involve sacrifice. So, what do you have to lose? So very much depends on how each one of us answers that question.

Prayer:

-sent Jesus to show /teach /lead by example

-but it is so hard to follow

-scary, risky, dangerous

-we say "your will be done"...

Renew our desire to follow you and give us the strength and the courage to be faithful.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil
For thine is the glory, the power, forever and ever. Amen