

6th Sunday After Pentecost
June 26, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa

Lectionary 13, Pentecost 5, Year C
Nathan Wicks, Preaching

The Gospel for today begins with Jesus “setting his face towards Jerusalem.” He is determined, focused and will not be distracted but will stick to this way. The Gospel of Luke is especially concerned with “the Way” as a description of Christian life and the early church community, and this passage describes how this way looks for Jesus. It is a single-minded, always forward looking drive which leads ultimately to his being lifted up on a cross. Early Christian communities understood themselves as those always travelling “the Way,” as the ones “daily taking up their cross and following,” as the ones who in the midst of persecution did not have a place to rest their head but were always journeying, always moving forward, led by the Spirit to proclaim this way of Christ, the way of the cross, as the way of salvation.

And for us today, we can identify with this forward looking drive. We like progress, we like setting a goal and sticking to a plan in order to reach that goal. But I think some of our assumptions about travel may change our imagery and understanding of what it means to travel on the Way from what Jesus is talking about. When we think of a goal, we also think of the road to that goal as a straight line with the goal sitting there at the end, and once it is achieved it is finished. We think of straight lines and of highways and cars travelling 75 mph, which when interrupted by a construction zone and a decrease to 55 or even, God forbid, a detour, we think of frustration almost to the point of despair. A construction zone may even cause us to speak the name of God, but probably not in the same spirit as those early Christians travelling the Way. We may even like to cut out the road altogether and take a plane to

travel vast distances in extremely short intervals of time without any relation to the points in between. We think of a purpose driven life, and *that* life is most certainly driven by a purposeful engine, probably in a car on some highway heading straight towards some horizon farther than our eyes can see.

But look at the imagery Jesus uses in speaking about the Way. He talks about a person plowing a field who with a constant focus and an unwillingness to be distracted maintains a straight line and so eventually completes the task. And although plowing requires the straightness of the furrow being plowed, there is also a circular aspect to it. A plow person can't simply plow a straight line off into the horizon, but they have to turn and always move forward in relation to where they have been. Also a plow person has to do this strategically, making sure the soil from one furrow is thrown into the trough created from the last furrow, usually making somewhat of a spiral pattern, so that two troughs don't end up next to each other and leave the field a big washboard of troughs and peaks. They start at the center of the field and move outward, and when finished they may have travelled quite a few miles, but they end up very close to the place they started.

A helpful practice which mirrors this image of plowing a field, and which all of us can take up without getting into farming, is to walk a labyrinth. Labyrinths have been created for centuries as places to practice the non-linear metaphor for the journey of a life with all of its twists and turns, and I think it is also similar to "the Way" that Jesus is talking about. The labyrinth only has one way to go, and though it may look and feel like the Israelites wandering around for 40 years in the wilderness, never heading straight to the center, in fact sometimes heading in the opposite direction altogether, every step is truly one step closer to the "promised land" at the center. It is not a maze, trying to trick you with false alleys or dead ends, but it always leads to the center. And the way out is also the way in. But after you have been to the

center, every landmark, every place you have been on the way in is seen from a different perspective, it is transformed in some way by the journey itself.

This summer I am working as a chaplain in a hospital, giving pastoral care to those dealing with illness, loss, and death. We have used this image of the labyrinth when talking about dealing with loss and death along with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's 5 stages of grief. The stages are Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. We are taught that these stages are commonly passed through, but never in a straight line so that acceptance is some kind of finish line after which a person can move on with their life. There are times when you may go backwards and repeat one. And there is really no such thing as "closure" when it comes to living with deep, and heart wrenching loss. We are taught that in dealing with loss a person might turn inward and like a labyrinth in that non-linear way meander through and find themselves surprised by each of these stages on their way towards the center. And from that place of acceptance they may then find the energy to head outward again, to reinvest energy in new relationships and the world, but that on the way out these stages will reemerge. They are not simply over and done with, but a person will always carry the loss with them. Yet these stages are transformed by the journey, they find themselves changed by passing through this place of deep loss, and as they end up in the place they began they are able to live in and for the world in ways they could not have imagined previously.

And so as a chaplain I have to understand that a person in the midst of sickness or facing death is on a journey, like a person walking a labyrinth they too are meandering along a path towards a single ending. I can't build a bridge over the path of loss or death or tell them I believe they will "find a home on God's celestial shore." There is no way out but through. I might ask them how they are making meaning in the midst of their pain and sickness, how they think about their life now that they

are approaching its end, or where is God for them in the midst of this, and they may say they fully put their trust in God. And I will say yes... and they may go on and say it's not the doctors who have my life, it is God... and I will say yes... and they may go on and say the doctors have given them 6 months to live, but God knows more than the doctors... and I will hesitate a little bit, feel saddened, and say yes... and they may go on and say all the people in their family lived into their 90's, If God doesn't want them yet God will fix the hole in their heart. God is more powerful than their Doctors... and I will pause... I see now that we are not thinking about the same thing anymore. They may look expectantly at me, and I will stay with them and say "Yes, God is more powerful than your doctors."

I want to say, God is bigger than death too, God has been to the cross, I want to say, There is new life there, you can trust God even in the face of death, there is new life there because of what Jesus has done for you. But I don't say that. I can see that it is already true. God is also bigger than denial, God is bigger than my desire to fix someone else's pain, God will accomplish God's purposes one way or another, even in the midst of a wandering journey through the labyrinth of loss and death, through denial and anger, and all those landmarks along the way. And so instead of trying to point to an end to the journey, I just say yes, thank you for sharing that with me. I want my presence to be permission for this person to fully embody themselves as they are, at whatever point of the journey they may be. Let them fully embody themselves exactly as they are, even all the ways they are trying to be something else, all the false expectations they are building, all their reluctance to look at their loss and grief and to let them give it voice, let it inhabit space in the reality of their experience of the world. I may try to reframe something slightly to get them unstuck, but to let their thoughts and feelings become fully incarnate is to continue on the way, take one more step on the path. To fully incarnate your life is to be on the way towards the fulfillment of Christ's incarnation. This is the way of the cross. There is

anger, forsakenness, distrust, death and every painful emotion at the heart of this labyrinth, but there is also Christ there on the cross, experiencing it all, taking it all into himself, and giving himself for this person. They will never be able to reclaim the life they have lost, but because of Christ I believe there is new life in this exact place. I trust in this, I trust in what Christ has done for this person, and know that the cross is at the center of their experience too. This is the way of the cross and, because of what Christ has done in the very human experience of loss and death, this is also the way of everlasting life. So for those of us travelling on “the Way,” this may be the end, but it is also the beginning... Amen.