

October 15, 2017

National Presbyterian Church

On the Road with Jesus VI: Slowing Down

Exodus 20:8-11, Deuteronomy 5:12, 15

Genesis 28:10-22; Jonah 2:1-3:1; Matthew 6:25-34; Acts 14:24-28

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In our sermons this fall we're thinking about the Christian Life in terms of a journey – a spiritual journey in which we grow and change as we travel with Jesus on what we call “the pathway of discipleship.”

So far we've thought about this pathway, this spiritual journey

- In terms of *the importance of having a leader* – a guide, or mentor, or shepherd – someone ahead of us to show us the way! (And we need to ask Jesus to be that person for us!)
- And we've thought, too, about *the difficulties setting out*, just getting going.
 - Sometimes it's hard because of the past that we can't let go.
 - Or because of the future that we face with a sense of fear

(And we need to remember that God is the God of time – our past, and present and future)

- And then too, what we've seen is that on this spiritual journey there can be *setbacks in the middle*, when we're on our way. (And what Jesus tells us to do is to grit our teeth, and “stay the course”: he's been there too, and he'll lead us through)
- And then last week we thought about *the importance of not traveling alone*, but having traveling companions – friends who share our faith; not just God or Jesus, as friends, but friends in flesh and blood.
 - We need flesh and blood friends especially when we mess up;
 - or when the adventure becomes fearful or tragic, and we need the help, and comfort and wisdom and encouragement and the touch and strength of others!

And God himself is the one who wants us to have not only his companionship, but fellow human beings as ‘traveling companions’ in the faith.

In 2009 Atul Gawande, who teaches at the Harvard Medical School, wrote a book called *The Checklist Manifesto* -- in which, among other things, he showed that a sense of community and connectedness, even in the middle of a surgical operation, can save lives.

We all know that this is what airline pilots do: they use checklists before a plane takes off when hundreds of lives are at stake. So, Gawande said, in effect, “I'll run an experiment by bringing a two-minute checklist into the operating rooms of 8 hospitals, and see if it makes any difference.”

And what did he discover? Well, he said . . . “We began to catch basic mistakes” – like forgetting to have enough anti-biotics and blood in the room! He also put some simple things on the checklist that they previously hadn't thought about: like making sure everyone in the operating room knows each other by name.

Surgeons, he said, often have a hard time admitting weakness, and this simple act of acknowledging everyone on the team, was not only a reminder of their own human

fallibility and limitations and their need of the help of others, BUT it also made a huge difference in results . . . so that

- when introductions were made with everyone on the surgical team before surgery (when traveling companions introduced themselves and became human)
- Then the average number of complications and deaths dipped by 35%.”
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=122226184>

“Follow me!” says Jesus – and remember that

- You need others -- AND they need you. You’ve got to find some “traveling companions,” traveling close enough with you to share the journey. (*Are you doing that? Have you done that?*)

And more than that, along the way (and this is what I want us to think about today), we also need to pay attention to our speed!

- We need to MAKE time not only to keep traveling (sometimes with Jesus it can be fast-paced, rapid)
- But to make and take time to *slow down* . . .

In his classic book, Seven Habits of Highly Successful People, Stephen Covey has a chapter entitled “Sharpen the Saw,” and it begins like this (p.287)

Suppose you were to come upon someone in the woods working feverishly to saw down a tree.

“What are you doing?” you ask.

“Can’t you see?” comes the impatient reply. “I’m sawing down this tree.”

“You look exhausted!” you exclaim. “How long have you been at it?”

“Over five hours,” he returns, “and I’m beat! This is hard work.”

“Well, why don’t you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen that saw? I’m sure it would go a lot faster.”

“I don’t have time to sharpen the saw,” says the man emphatically.

“I’m too busy -- sawing!”

And poor man is probably still sawing today! In fact, sometimes, unless someone stops us in our tracks and makes us slow down we’ll never make it far in life; or we’ll keep going down the wrong road to nowhere!

In one of my churches a group of youth set out one Friday evening (before the advent of GPS) to go to a weekend retreat, at a camp an hour away. And about an hour and a half later, one of the parents received a call from their child with the basic question: “How do you get to the camp?” To which the reply came (of course) “It all depends where you are. Where are you?”

And then there was that awful realization that the kids had headed 60 miles in the wrong direction before they’d slowed down to ask the way . . . They finally got to the retreat – but way late!

In the Old Testament JACOB (whose name became “Israel”) was one of those who needed to slow down before his life could get back on the right path. He’d cheated his brother and lied to his father; he’s made a real mess of things, and had to run away from home. So he set out on a journey (not of his own choosing!) for fear of his life, and it was only on a dark, starry night, when he’d taken a stone for his pillow and fallen asleep, that he finally slowed down for God to capture his attention. This is what we read in Gen.28:13

As he slept -- The Lord stood beside him and said,

“I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac;
the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring;
Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,
and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have
promised you.”

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said,

“Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!” . . .
[and he began to talk to God and said]:
this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house;
and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you.”

He made a commitment to tithe to God! A commitment to become a giver and not a getter! And
his life was forever changed – but ONLY when he slowed down (or, to be precise, when God
slowed him down!)

Or think about the story of JONAH and the great fish. Jonah is on a journey too. It’s a pretty
futile journey: he’s trying to run away from God, and from God’s purpose for his life (and that’s
the path some of us may be on too). What God wants is for Jonah to love his enemies (the
Assyrians), and Jonah doesn’t want to do so!

And that’s where the fish comes into the picture. Jonah’s on a ship – running away from God,
and in a storm he’s thrown overboard by the crew, and thinks his life is over. But he ends up
inside this huge the fish sent by God to save him. And it’s as if this gruesome place is the only
place where God could slow Jonah down and get his attention!

It’s there, trapped by God in the belly of the fish, *with no cell phone or wi-fi or future*, that (like
Jacob) he begins to pray, and realizes that the one who gave him his life, and saved his life when
other powers were way too strong -- that this God, knew far better about the best pathway for his
life than he did. And so he changed his direction and purpose – for God.

OR in the New Testament, think of the **APOSTLE PAUL** in the early days of the Christian
Church. He too was on a journey – one that he thought was God’s journey. He was on a journey
to Damascus in Syria – to kill Christians, because he thought this was what God wanted! He
believed profoundly that Jesus’ claim to divinity was blasphemous, and so he wanted to wipe out
Jesus’ followers from the face of the earth.

In fact he was furious with them, and so mad with anger that he couldn’t see that what he was
doing was awful, and wrong, and literally God-less.

And sometimes when we’re mad -- we do awful things too

- Sometimes we’re openly awful and violent – we blow out top like Paul
- But sometimes we’re awful – and passive. So we hold our cards close to our chest; we
keep our mouths shut. But when the time is right,
 - we fail to give support to someone we know is struggling
 - we let them stew in their own juice
 - we spread a little dissension here or there

And the damage – like the recent foreign (Russian?) use of social media, can be enormous, but
virtually undetectable.

- And it looks as if our hands are clean – but they’re not.
- And Paul thought his hands were clean but they weren’t.

In his anger, he couldn't see the harm he was doing: that instead of serving God he was opposing God. He missed it! Until God stopped him on his journey that day, and blinded him with a flash of light, and spoke to him by the risen Jesus – calling him to repent and to serve him forever. And when he got over the shock and regained his sight, he actually decided to go slow for the next three years!

Paul spends the next three years reading his Bible as he has never done before; and seeing in the Scriptures that Jesus of Nazareth – the crucified, dead, buried and risen Jesus – is in fact the savior promised by God: the one he too was supposed to worship!

And Paul changes direction! In fact, he would later write to some Christian friends (Phil.3:8) that, “Whatever gains he'd had before that time, he now counted as loss, in contrast to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord.”

Sometimes -- until we slow down or stop, we cannot even see that we're on the wrong path; that we have the world upside down – not right side up.

David Brooks describes this kind of disconnect in terms of what he calls “Eulogy virtues” and “Resume virtues” <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html>

- The résumé virtues (he says) are the skills you bring to the marketplace.
- The eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral -- whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful; whether you were capable of deep love.

We all know (he says) that the eulogy virtues are more important than the résumé ones. But our culture and our educational systems spend more time teaching the skills and strategies needed for career success (the “résumé virtues”) than the qualities needed to radiate some sort of inner light (eulogy virtues).

Many of us are clearer on how to build an external career – than on how to build inner character. But if you live for external achievement, the years can pass and the deepest parts of you can go unexplored and unstructured.

You lack a moral vocabulary. It is easy to slip into a self-satisfied moral mediocrity, because you grade yourself on a “forgiving curve.”

You figure – as long as you are not obviously hurting anybody, and people seem to like you, you must be O.K.

And, gradually, a humiliating gap opens between your actual self and your desired self; between you, and those incandescent souls you sometimes meet.

Of course, in all of us, to some extent or another, this humiliating gap is there. And in all of us too, to some extent, we are blissfully UN-self-aware of how big the gap is. Unless, of course, we've really blown it, and God intervenes in a big way

- Stops us in our tracks
- Speaks to us through an angel or a dream,
- or imprisons us for our own good in some kind of big fish
- or gives to us a spiritual experience we cannot deny.

But failing “the big experience,” how do we find a way in our 24/7 society, to go slow: not only to see ourselves as we are, and cry for mercy, but to seek out God's direction, or purpose, or path

for our lives, and to find the energy and strength and wisdom to follow that path every day? And to get to know the Guide who promises to lead us on the path?

How does this happen?

Well, there's only one way I know: *by using our power to choose!*

- choosing to slow down, and sharpen the saw
- choosing to listen to God's sixth commandment about the Sabbath Day

In the commandment (that we read in Exodus and Deuteronomy) God is saying

SLOW DOWN! This is an order! It's a commandment not a suggestion! At least one day a week, "Remember that God is the Creator and Redeemer." SLOW DOWN! Remember that you and everything else that -God-has-made belong to the Creator and not to you

SLOW DOWN! And remember that God wants to redeem and has grand purposes for you, and for others too (including the ones you find hard to love);

SLOW DOWN! Don't abandon or soft pedal the habit of meeting together Sunday by Sunday and week by week for worship together as a church. And do this -- even though it's increasingly hard, and all the cultural pressure is against us, and all the stresses and strains in life are against us. To be sure,

- we have families we need to see
- and children involved in sports
- and work that is piled on top of us
- and exhaustion from the rest of the week

And it's easier just to go with the flow -- and let it slip, but don't let it!

Remember God's Commandment! Or we'll inevitably head down our own path, where, as David Brooks said:

"a humiliating gap gradually opens between your actual self and your desired self."

It can be hard to make this time, but it's something we need to do together in community – with our traveling companions

- whether on Sundays
- or in our small group during the week (do you have one yet?)
- and by ourselves – in private too

Jesus, our guide not only slowed down every week – taking a side-trip to the synagogue (told in Luke 4), to listen with others to the reading of scripture, and to hear it explained together, and to sing and pray together (this was his custom every week). But more than that, it was also his practice to spend time alone with God. Sometimes all night! Sometimes in the early morning –to SLOW DOWN! To be with God – alone by himself.

And he expects his followers – you and me – to do the same: to develop the habit "of going into a small room by ourselves to spend time alone with God in prayer in secret." (Matthew 6)

This is what I was taught to do as a boy at summer camp, when I was 13: to begin each day by SLOWING DOWN; finding a room or chair or place to have a "Quiet Time": a time of Bible reading and prayer alone with God.

A couple of weeks ago in *The Atlantic Online* Katelyn Beaty wrote an article on prayer, in which she reminded her probably overwhelmingly secular readership about the benefits of prayer:

In the 1990s, neuroscientist Andrew Newberg famously studied the brain scans of 150 people from different religions, from Franciscan nuns to Buddhist monks.

He found that those who engaged deeply in prayer for 12 minutes a day over a couple of months – those who prayed regularly – were more focused, less anxious, and felt more connected to other people.

And in 2014, Harvard scientist Sara Lazar expanded on Newberg's findings, discovering that after 30 minutes of meditation, brain scans showed changes in areas that positively affected *emotional control, the mind wandering, learning, cognition, memory, empathy, compassion, anxiety, fear, and stress.*

The Case for 'Thoughts and Prayers'—Even If You Don't Believe in God. The Atlantic Online. Katelyn Beaty Oct 6, 2017

That list pretty much covers the gamut of what we all want for our lives doesn't it?! *emotional control, the mind wandering, learning, cognition, memory, empathy, compassion, anxiety, fear, and stress.*

Who doesn't want that?

Travel with me says Jesus

- Sometimes at rapid pace . . . I know
- Sometimes on paths you would never choose

But, along the way, before I have to stop you in your tracks, make it your choice, your practice, your habit, to SLOW DOWN – and just be with me, so that I can make sure that I'm inside your heart and soul and hands and feet and that we're traveling together on the same path and in the same direction forever!

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