

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose

6-26-16

“Future Focused”

Dear Friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Do any of you have your cranky pants on today? Anyone feeling a little ornery, crabby or just sorta upset? Well, if you feel like that today, you're in good company. Jesus seems to be really cranky to everyone in the gospel reading today.

We can make fun of him, but his crankiness is probably fairly well justified. He knows that he needs to head toward Jerusalem. We don't know exactly what Jesus knew, and when, and how, about this trip toward his death -- but this much is clear. Jesus knows that he must go to Jerusalem. The time has come to face his adversaries head-on, and he very well might not survive this confrontation with his political and religious enemies, all of whom are threatened by him, his message, and his popularity.

Through Luke's eyes, we see Jesus walking with determination: “He set his face to go to Jerusalem.” He's walking with such focus that he walks right through the region of Samaria without stopping to talk to anyone. Jesus marches on. The crowds start to follow, as they always do. They clamber for Jesus' attention. “I'll follow you, Jesus!” one person says. Jesus doesn't sugarcoat what that means. “If you're following me, you're following someone who doesn't have a home. Are you prepared for that kind of life?” Another one says, “I'll follow you, Jesus, right after my father's funeral.” Jesus answers, “When you sign up to follow me, my mission takes precedence over everything else. Let the dead bury their own dead.” Yikes, really Jesus? I can't bury my father first? You can't possibly be serious.

The final person says, “Jesus, I'm in – just as soon as I say goodbye to everyone back home.” And Jesus (cranky Jesus, if you want to call him that) says, “This not a time to say goodbye. This is a time to move forward.” Jesus marches on. Towards Jerusalem. Towards conflict. Toward his death. We don't know what was on Jesus' mind, not exactly. But we do learn three things about him from this passage. First: Jesus lived with a complete focus on what God had called him to do. His entire attention is on his mission and purpose. Second: Jesus lived in the present moment. He didn't dwell on the past nor did he worry about the future. If we have any control over our lives, that control is solely in the here and now. “What are you going to do today? How are you going to cope today?” Jesus knew that. And the third lesson is: Jesus knew he needed to be surrounded by strong people who would support him and not deter him. He needed to keep moving in the right direction; he didn't want anyone around who would doubt or waver or try to steer him astray. Jesus marches on, because his inner compass knows exactly where it's going.

Many scholarly articles and commentaries - and even sermons about this passage talk about how this sort of determination is what it means to be a disciple. They talk about how we need to only focus our attention on following Jesus and abandon all other things. I'll be honest with you, this all is sort of

difficult for me to swallow, I mean, here I am a pastor and I know I can't do what this passage is telling me to do. So how then would I be able to stand up here and tell you that you have to do all these things when I can't even do them myself?

Well, that's why I was glad I read one particular story that reminded me that only Jesus could have the faith to do that. That only Jesus could perfectly and stubbornly put his face toward Jerusalem. No follower of Christ has ever been perfect at following Jesus 100% of the time and focusing on Jesus 100% and never falling down at it. Rather, God always calls people who are imperfect, perfectly imperfect, those who always seem to be making mistakes. Jesus' original twelve disciples were the people who were closest to Jesus and yet who time and time again did not understand Him. Jesus spent so much time trying to explain to the disciples who He was, what He stood for, and what was to come of Him. However, they continued to fail miserably in grasping who He was and to embody His message within their own relationships and ministry.

On March 7, 1965, approximately 600 people left Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma, Alabama on a march to Montgomery. They were seeking voting rights for African-American citizens. The group was violently attacked by police on foot and on horseback, and by a group of citizens who had been recruited as a 'posse.' The day became known as Bloody Sunday. 70 to 80 people were injured and 17 were hospitalized overnight. But the group was undeterred. The violence so horrified the nation that two days later a group of 1,500 gathered from around the country to join them on their march. Led by Martin Luther King Jr., the marchers were once again met by state troopers. This time, King knelt, led the group in prayer, and they all returned to Brown Chapel to avoid violence.

Then the third attempt to march to Montgomery began on March 21st when thousands gathered in Selma. President Johnson, having been inundated with telephone calls and strong words from members of Congress, ordered the National Guard to protect the marchers. And after that only 300 marchers were allowed on the road to Montgomery. The marchers walked about 12 miles a day in unusually cold temperatures, which fell below freezing on some nights. They slept in farmers' fields, and local churches brought food and blankets. It rained almost every day. Finally, on March 25, 1965, 25,000 people from around the nation, and indeed around the world, made it to the steps at Montgomery and listened as Martin Luther King Jr. spoke.

Among the things he said to a cheering crowd was, 'They told us we wouldn't get here. And there were those who said that we would get here only over their dead bodies, but all the world today knows that we are here and we are standing before the forces of power in the state of Alabama saying, 'We ain't goin' let nobody turn us around!'" King's words brought the crowd to a mountain top of determination and as he continued he said; "And so as we go away this afternoon, let us go away more than ever before committed to this struggle and committed to nonviolence. He said, I must admit to you that there are still some difficult days ahead. We are still in for a season of suffering in many of the black belt counties of Alabama, many areas of Mississippi, many areas of Louisiana. I must admit to you that there are still jail cells waiting for us, and dark and difficult moments. But if we will go on with the faith that

nonviolence and its power can transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows, we will be able to change all of these conditions.”

In today’s passage from Luke, Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem seeking the freedom of God’s reign in our lives, saying with his words and his actions, “We aren’t going to let anybody turn us around!” We as a church today are called to live out this story of truth and freedom. We are to seek the “Kingdom of God” and not turn back. We are in hallowed and holy company when we join the cry, “We ain’t going to let nobody turn us around!”

I’m sure some of you are thinking - how am I possibly going to measure up to Martin Luther King Jr.? Or, what does this story have to do with us here today? This story is an example of a modern-day disciple at his best. Martin Luther King Jr. set his face toward a particular goal and was determined to lead the fight for equal rights through nonviolence. He accomplished an amazing feat in his life. Sure, God would love for all of us to live up to what Martin Luther King Junior accomplished, but through God’s grace God accepts us as we are and can use us no matter how many times we stumble during our lifelong journeys of faith.

I know we will stumble. Just look at James and John in today’s story. These two disciples of Jesus, who, by the way, are appropriately nicknamed the Sons of Thunder, wanted to “command fire to come down from heaven and consume” the innocent Samaritans. Now does that sound like something the Jesus we know would want to do? No, so Jesus rebuked them. He did not disown them or send them away, rather He corrected them, and He righted their way. For a moment they took their eyes off the plowshare and looked back to old ways rather than looking forward toward Jesus’ way of peace, love and reconciliation. When Jesus was telling His would-be or could-be disciples that they needed to let their dead bury their own dead, He was describing the urgency of the call to discipleship.

Many pastors preach this text of urgency in a way that tells people they must drop everything, absolutely everything, and follow the call. I am afraid if we go down that path we can become legalistic about our faith. If we were to drop everything, that would include our occupations, our families, our friends, even the shirt on our backs, you name it... There would be no middle ground here. That’s not what I believe the point of the story is. Rather, we are called to set our faces toward the Kingdom of God and while we try to do the will of God we will stumble and that’s okay. There may be times in our lifelong journeys of faith when something gets in our way and our faces aren’t exactly set towards God’s goals for us. But God will still be there for us. God can still use us because when you look at who all of His original disciples were many times they acted more like the Three Stooges than disciples. The point isn’t that a disciple must be good enough (to meet some merciless standard) in order to get approval. The point is the scandalously redemptive, unmanageably loving grace of God.

Jesus calls us to walk with him, taking risks, throwing ourselves fully into this turbulent life, giving up the illusion of control, trusting that God will join us in the adventure, hold onto us through all of the ups and downs, and bring us in time to the other side..

Thanks be to God. Amen.