

Two Models for the Church—"On the Edge" and "Off its Rocker"

(Joshua 3: 1-17; 2 Corinthians 4: 13-17; Psalm 138; Mark 3: 20-35)

In the long church season of Pentecost in the current lectionary cycle, most of our Gospel lessons are going to be found in Mark's gospel, and most of those will urge us to take a close look at the *style* of ministry that Jesus practiced—to look at his ministry on the backdrop of a very different yet possibly prevailing type of ministry. Specifically, we'll see His "ministry of *reconciliation*" over against the "ministry of *entitlement*" that was ever so popular among the Pharisees. Today we need to focus directly on the two the *models for the church* that follow from these two different styles of ministry.

We have two biblical stories that we're going to press into service in this regard. The one story we heard as our Gospel lesson this morning. It was a brief description of a fairly typical day in the life of Jesus. He's busy beyond belief, crowded in as ever, with lots of insults being hurled at him as he works. The other story is one from ancient Hebrew history, about Joshua when he's being given instructions about leading the people of Israel across the Jordan into their new territory.

In my understanding, both of these stories provide a model for the church. No doubt that sounds a little strange to some, to speak of "church" in the Hebrew or "Old Testament" context, but that shouldn't be the case. If we understand "church" as a body of people who understand themselves to be faithful children of God, who have been called together and commissioned together to do God's work and God's will in the world, this understanding was already present in the Hebrew scriptures and it was a key defining element of Jewish theology. The new church that appears after the resurrection of Christ was not a new *invention*, it was in continuity with God's covenant people. The church of Christ has more things *in common* with the earlier Covenant community than it has differences. The earlier version of church suited the purposes of Jesus very well—with a few subtle changes and developments.

The main action in the Joshua story is quite simple: all the Israelite people are lined up at the edge of the Jordan River, ready to follow the Ark of the Covenant over onto new ground. At the crucial moment, the water is parted for them and the people walk across. There is, of course, a strong *echo* here of the Exodus story, when the waters were parted for the people on their way out of Egypt. But what you really have to notice in *this* story is all the things that are *different* compared to the Exodus. Here's one difference, and it's right at the top of the list. In the Exodus story, the people were *going out*, exiting and escaping in a hurry. In the Joshua story, they're going *into* new territory, and more importantly, they're going into new possibilities. Here's another difference: in the Exodus story, they're going out in great *fear* for their *lives*. But here at the Jordan, they're going *in* and the instruction is clear: they need to step forward *in faith*, into a place where they've never been before, into something radically and totally new. Here's another difference that you can easily visualize. Do you remember in the Exodus story, especially the way Cecil B. De Mille showed it to you in *The Ten Commandments*, how Moses was way up high on the bank of the Red Sea, holding out his staff? Well, in the Joshua story, Joshua does *no imitation* of Moses. This time the instruction is that the *people* are to go forward

and put *their* feet *in the water* at the river's edge. There's no Moses, no prophet, no leader to do it *for* them. This time, it's the *people's* turn. First go the priests carrying the Ark, then twelve ordinary guys to represent each of the twelve tribes, and the command is to get *out* there and get your *feet wet* even *before* the waters get parted! Get out there, not just *near* the edge but *in* it and actually start *doing* a radically new thing.

The ancient storyteller adds a wee bit of drama. This just happens to be the season when the river is in *flood*, and it just happens to be where the Jordan River empties the Sea of Galilee on its way down to the Dead Sea, so the river might be about half a mile wide here and flowing at pretty good speed. But the promise that *gets them moving* is that God will meet them *at the crossing*, and that God will act, and will reveal and will enable them to pass what would otherwise have been an *impassible* barrier and a whole *flood* of opposition.

When we bring that story into the context of the early Christian Church, do you see any parallels? Do you hear any echoes? How about the *Pentecost* story, when the disciples crossed over into new territory to start *being* the Church—do you know, if those fellows hadn't got up from the table, gone out the door and down into the street, nothing would have happened. You could say they had to get their feet wet before the fire could come down.

The simple truth is that this Church Jesus gave us, by his example and through his Holy Spirit, must *always* be *on the edge*, actually *moving forward* into new opportunities that God sets before us, already getting our feet wet because it's *there* that God meets us. Jesus did not call us to be a *museum* where all the old traditions are displayed and honoured, where all the people—*especially* the Presbyterians—can swoon about how much they like the old and how change ought always to be avoided. It's at the crossing *into* new territory, new mission, new possibilities that God meets us, calms our fears, enables us to *be* the Church in new ways, the church that's always on the move, always reforming.

Here's a story I heard a few years ago, told by a minister-friend who was serving as the Interim-Moderator for a vacant multi-point charge right in the middle of the prairies. One of the elders of the smallest church of the charge was whining about how bad things were and how bleak the outlook was. "We sometimes only get a dozen people out on a Sunday," she said. He replied, "Did you know that Jesus started his Church with only *eleven*? You're already ahead of the game, already into *plus-territory*!" She answered back, "But our town is so small it seems to be dying." He asked how many people were still there. "Oh, maybe five hundred," she said. "Do you know *how many* people it takes to make the church *grow*?" he asked. She was silent, so he gave the answer, "Only two—it takes one from *within* the church, and *one* from *outside*; one from inside who cares enough to say and/or *do* what it will take to persuade the other, and one to *be* persuaded. Okay", he said, "so you've got 500 around you and at least 12 within—lady, you've got huge possibilities and *no end* of opportunities!"

If the idea is to get out there and get our feet wet, then in here in the North we've got all the *advantage*. Here it doesn't matter which road you take, the water is *never* far away! And if the idea is to try something new, well that's a *mighty* wide field—there are *millions* of things we've never tried, all of them for the same reason, namely, that *we've never done that before!* If the idea is to jump in and meet God at the crossing—at the place where what seems impossible to *us* is about to be *made possible* by God, that's worth the risk *and* we'll be in good company.

Now, that other story I promised you, from Mark's gospel, is going to address the perception of going not just *near* the edge but perhaps right *over it*. Mark describes it as if a typical day in the ministry of Jesus. Wherever he goes, the crowd gathers and follows, and then gets bigger and bigger, making it hard for him to move around easily or even take care of personal business, like eating. As the crowd gets *louder*, some of his family members hear about it. We might *like* to think that *these* people would be the ones who know him best, but they decide immediately that he's gone right out of his mind and needs to be put away, for his own good. At the same time, some Temple bigwigs arrive from Jerusalem and they agree enthusiastically with the family's diagnosis—yup, right off his rocker *and* possessed by a devil, just for good measure!

Jesus has no trouble explaining to the Temple dignitaries the errors of their reasoning, and the eternal risk they are taking in making their pronouncement. He doesn't even respond to the erroneous perception of his own family that he's off his rocker. When they come looking for him and try to get his attention, his reply is basically *one* word, and a rather *icy* one at that—“*Who?*” And then he goes on to explain to his followers that those who do what *he* does, who *follow him* in doing God's will, in being this new model for church, *are his family of faith*.

That, I think, is as clear as you find it anywhere in the gospels. Jesus is not just a teacher or a preacher, he's a *model* for the church. And he takes church to a whole new level. On his model, other people may well think that we've gone right off the edge. But what he does, *we need to be doing*. It may well happen that if and when we are doing what he has done—crossing the kind of boundaries that *he* did, snubbing the social conventions and the majority view, daring to touch and accept people that no one else would—it may well happen that we will be perceived by some as right off *our* rocker. That's an occupational hazard for the church. Frankly, I think it can be *expected* if we're following Jesus as closely as we should.

Personally, I find exciting new courage and loads of fresh hope in the biblical wisdom about the family of Christ and the people of God in our always-challenging task of being the Church. If in doubt, then go at it like Jesus did. The perceptions of others don't matter. Even the erroneous perceptions we sometimes have of ourselves can furnish subtle reminders that we're on the right track, that we're following our Lord and model for the Church, that we're taking his genuinely good news in new directions and applying it to new situations. I think this should be our prayer for the church family that we represent, and that is preparing to enter new territory (maybe even our own sanctuary!) in a few

months—that you won’t get worried or flustered over the perceptions of others, that you won’t let erroneous perceptions bend you out of shape or lower your expectations, that you will deal with the reality and the new opportunities faithfully and forget about all the rest. This could/should also be our prayer for our larger Presbyterian church in Canada, gathering (virtually) in General Assembly beginning today. We too are, at the very least, “on the edge” of something and, after last year’s cancelled Assembly, we’ve been standing with our feet in the water for so long that our toes are beginning to look like prunes! Depending on the outcome of this Assembly (and there are many different outcomes available) it may possibly seem that we also have “gone right off *our* rocker.” Nevertheless, if we’re guided by the Holy Spirit in our decisions, if we can find helpful wisdom in some biblical models for the Church, and (we pray) if our Lord gets *His* turn at the microphone, we have nothing to fear and everything to gain!

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