

Everything I Needed to Know about Discipleship, I Learned from a Turtle!

(2 Samuel 6: 1-5, 12-19; Ephesians 1: 3-14; Psalm 24; Mark 6: 14-29)

One of my very favourite characters from Christian history is a rather obscure German monk from the Middle Ages. He was both an academic and a mystic, simply known as “Meister Eckhart”. The “Meister” part of his name was not exactly a given name but rather a title which he had earned by virtue of his teaching and preaching. Eckhart had, among other qualities, a large dose of that love for *animals* that had also been a characteristic of St. Francis of Assisi. And actually, since Francis lived only a generation before Eckhart and not so far away, it’s quite conceivable that Eckhart would have known about Francis. A large sample of Eckhart’s sermons have survived, and they are not for the faint-hearted or literal-minded, but in one of them he wrote this memorable statement, “If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature—even a caterpillar—I would never have to prepare another sermon. So full of God is every creature.”

I have often wished to be able to prove Eckhart’s idea true—to be able to squeeze a whole sermon out of an animal, especially when desperately needed or on short notice. Actually, I *do* take a stab at that most weeks in worship when chatting with kids or full-grown kids, and I think it works reasonably well there. But to do that in adult time, basically letting an animal deliver the sermon—what I would give to see that happen!

Well, it just so happens that today, I think I can come fairly close to that goal. See what you think about this. All I have to do is introduce my “animal of the day”, which happens to be a *turtle*, and then point to our gospel text about the fate of John the Baptist. If you can make a connection between the two, if you can identify exactly *which* quality of the turtle is front and centre in the *text*, I think you’ll have the whole sermon right there and I won’t have to say a whole lot more.

Ah, but *which* quality of the turtle? This may take a little work. I’m *not* thinking of the way the turtle carries its house on its back, or the way it retreats into its shell when threatened, or

the way it moves so painfully slowly, or the way it picks the worst possible times to cross a highway. What I *am* thinking about is what a turtle has to do *first* in order to move *forward*. What does a turtle have to do *in order to* move? It has to... *stick its neck out*. If it's all pulled back into its shell, the turtle can't move anywhere. It has to stick its neck out.

In our gospel story, what does John the Baptist *do* here? He sticks his neck out—quite literally, and he does that for the final time in Herod's jail. But this action is entirely typical of John the Baptist in every story we have about him. He's *always* sticking his neck out by relentlessly speaking the truth against abuse, injustice, moral rot, compulsive lies and self-deception. He sticks his *neck* out by challenging *everybody*—from the high and mighty, like Herod, right down to the little guy on the street—to fix their hearts, mend their ways and change their thinking.

But this gospel story isn't *just* about John the Baptist, it's also about Jesus. Note carefully how our story begins—it's because Jesus *reminds* Herod, in a painful, haunting way of John the Baptist. In fact, Herod wonders if Jesus might be John the Baptist resurrected! And it's the same quality in Jesus that does the reminding—it's the way he too will stick his neck out to speak the truth, to confront injustice, to make a helpful and healing difference in the world. His ministry is moving forward, gaining power and why is he getting the attention of a character like Herod? Because Jesus sticks his neck out.

But there's *more* to the story than that. It isn't just about Jesus and John the Baptist. *Mostly* the story is about the *disciples*, and therefore it's as much about *us* as it is about those *first* followers of Jesus. Did you notice where Mark *places* this story in his gospel? Can you recall what happened in the verses just before? Well, at the tail end of *last week's* lesson, partly in response to the peculiar attitude he encountered in the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus sent the disciples *out* on a *mission* assignment. In giving that task, he was transforming their discipleship from a *passive kind of following* into a very *active kind of service*. They were taking

their first steps *forward* into ministry, taking the message and the power of Jesus on the road, and this was in essence part of his instruction to them—that they would have to be bold and courageous in the face of opposition, that they too would have to stick their necks out and speak the truth. There's always a risk involved in that kind of activity and the disciples needed to be aware of it, needed to learn all about it and put it into practice. So, for Mark's readers getting their first look at active discipleship, immediately they are given this hauntingly powerful image of John sticking *his* neck out and Jesus doing the very same thing. There is the first and foremost lesson about discipleship—you've got to do what the *turtle* does. You've got to move out of your comfort zone, out of your safe retreat.

OK, so if you get that connection, if that animal image works for you, if you can imagine a disciple of Jesus in the shape and posture of a moving turtle, then you've *got* it. Sermon is virtually done. I'll grant you that the image of the turtle could be a little unnerving, and also all this talk about sticking your neck out, when the story of John the Baptist is open in front of us, when you can see at a glance where it got him, when you can almost *feel the steel* as you read the words. But the fact is that *John wins* and Herod loses. And *Jesus wins*, and Herod *still* loses. Think of it. Even when disarmed, defenceless and *decapitated*, John's truth still speaks out just as clearly as it ever did. And the little puppets like Herod—they *always* self-destruct, they always succumb to their own internal rot, they fade away as quickly as their lies evaporate.

The bottom line? The truth wins and *it lives forever*. Love conquers *everything* else, even small-minded liars and would-be politicians. And do you see—that's *worth* sticking your neck out, to be on the side of *truth*, to harness that *power* of love, to be in the company of Christ's kind of disciples. It's well worth effort and all the cost, for Christian people to learn from the turtle—to get our necks out and get moving!

Almost done. There's one more thing that the turtle teaches, and even if it doesn't exactly appear in our text this morning, I think it may well have occurred to those disciples of Jesus out on the road, getting their on-the-job training in discipleship. Let me ask you, have you ever seen a turtle *run*? Especially the ones that pick a poor moment to cross the highway? Are any turtles known for their speed in the *sprint*? How did Aesop put it in his fable about the tortoise and the hare? "Slow but steady wins the race." It's not the short bursts of speed, but rather the stamina, the endurance and perseverance that matter most in the discipleship of Christ. It's the ability to keep on trying even when the odds appear to be stacked against you. Faith *without* perseverance generally won't amount to much. In the discipleship of Christ, it's not your starting speed, but your *staying* power. And this, too, is taught as eloquently and memorably by a *turtle* as it is by our Lord and his apostles.

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