

Travelling with Jesus: Staying Connected
July 24, 2016
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church
Rev. Tim Berlew

It was almost a year and a half ago. I got to my office and the phone rang. My secretary let me know the call was for me and I picked up and said, "Hello." The voice on the other end said, "We haven't talked in forever, but I have a favor to ask." I recognized the voice as someone I knew in junior high and high school. I can't believe I recognized the voice. It was someone I had not talked to in 28 years, since I played the organ for her wedding. I originally met her when her dad became the assistant superintendent of Everglades National Park and her family moved to Homestead, Florida. We were both in the 8th grade. We went to the same church. She was my date for the 9th grade prom! Her parents were the youth leaders for our UMYF. To cut to the chase, we had somewhat reconnected through Facebook. Both her mom and dad died within a year of each other. Both had been cremated. Her dad wanted to be buried in his home town in the family plot. His daughter wanted someone she knew to bury both her parents and she knew, through Facebook, that I had become a United Methodist pastor. I went and met her and her brother and some extended family in southeastern Colorado. We met up at a motel in the small town close to Mac's birthplace and after all those years we had a conversation. In some ways, it was like picking up where we left off, though there has been a lot of water under the bridge for all of us. I wish I could say we were new BFFs – best friends forever. We have kept up through Facebook, but life goes on for us in our separate worlds. Still, it was great to reconnect for that short period of time.

In our gospel lesson for today, one of the disciples asks Jesus to teach them how to pray as Jesus' cousin John had taught his followers to pray. Throughout Luke and Acts (both written by the same author), prayer holds an important place. Jesus prays at every critical point in his ministry. The disciples wanted to know how to connect and reconnect with God.

In today's gospel reading, we hear Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer. It is shorter and simpler than Matthew's version. Luke's has five parts to the seven parts found in Matthew's version. That prayer also appears in an important early church writing, *The Didache*, which is *The Teaching of the Apostles*. That version mirrors Matthew's and adds the doxology we know so well, "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen."

It is interesting that all of the parts of this reading, except "The Friend at Midnight" appear in Matthew as part of the Sermon on the Mount. Here in Luke, it appears as the disciples are moving toward Jerusalem and Jesus' death.

Luke follows this with the well-known, "Ask, and it will be given; seek and you will find; knock and the door shall be opened." I never noticed the "Knock" in this verse and its connection with the friend at midnight knocking at the door. Imagine the sleepy friend, or the sleepy God, answering the door! God's way of giving, as we see in today's gospel, always exceeds human giving.

Obviously, all of this asking, seeking, and knocking presupposes a relationship with God. How do we build this relationship? We build it through practicing the spiritual disciplines. We pray. We

read and study scripture. We receive the sacraments. We get together to speak of religious things. We care for others. We seek after justice.

We live in a society where we celebrate pulling oneself up by the bootstraps. It is about being a strong and capable individual. However, Christianity is not a solo sport. Christianity is practiced in community. The ancient rabbis used to warn people not to study scripture alone. Always study in community. It is too easy to take wrong turns.

Paul wrote today's epistle to the church at Colosse, where there were many enlightened people. They mixed other religious traditions with their Christianity. What is wrong with that, though? In the past few decades we have found fruitful ways of using Eastern religious practices in Christian prayer. Native American spirituality has found a home with Christianity in some spaces. Paul Knitter has written an excellent book entitled, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*.

The problem for the apostle Paul was this group of people, still young in the faith, lost Jesus as the center. The people, though young in the faith, were trying to find a way that moved them forward because, as we know, the world is changing constantly. It was no different for them. There was an ongoing search for meaning and purpose.

As a result, through the years, lots of strange things have been claimed in the name of Christianity.

- The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearance, better known to us as the Shakers, was a group that started in the 19th century. We know them best

as the people who gave us the folk hymn, “Tis the Gift to Be Simple, Tis the Gift to Be Free.” They believed their founder, Mother Ann Lee, was the Second Coming as Divine Wisdom. These folks practiced total celibacy, so all new members came through conversion. There were no children born into the faith. Their worship included frenetic dance, thus the name “Shakers.”

- William Miller and the Millerites believed in an intensive study of the numerology in the book of Daniel. They concluded the Lord would return March 21, 1843. They may have had as many as 100,000 followers.
- The Oneida Perfectionists were another group that hailed from Oneida, NY. They were founded by John Humphrey Noyes. While at Yale Divinity School, he claimed Christian perfection, untainted by any residue of sin. He could claim this because he said Christ had returned in AD 70 and given the church the power of his spirit. They pursued earthly perfection through economic sharing, divine healing, the mutual confession of sins (except by Noyes himself), and “complex marriage” – the rotation of husbands and wives among members of the community because perfected people should share all things. They became wealthy by manufacturing steel animal traps, travel bags, and silver-plated flatware. Oneida silverware, now produced by a secular company, is a tangible reminder of one of the more radical of reform experiments in this country.
- In the last several decades there have been other seemingly odd cults: a group that drank purple Kool Aid as part of a suicide pact in Jonestown and a group waiting for a spaceship to come pick them up out west.

The late Phyllis Tickle, in her excellent book *The Great Emergence*, tells of an Anglican bishop, Mark Dyer, who says that every 500 years the church holds a giant rummage sale to get rid of whatever is no longer useful. So, from the time of Jesus, there have been four major “rummage sales.”

- In 590 AD Gregory the Great became pope. This was during the fall of the Roman Empire. He worked toward the codification of all things “church”. He gave us “Gregorian Chant.” He saw to the rise of monasticism that would protect, preserve, and characterize the church for the next 5 centuries.
- In 1054 AD we had the Great Schism that split the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. It was mostly over adding the word “proceeds” to the Nicene Creed in the western church when speaking of the Holy Spirit. “The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified...” Otherwise, the Orthodox used leavened bread for communion and the Roman Church used unleavened bread.
- In 1517 Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg on the eve of All Saints Day. Thus began the rise of Protestantism as a disapproval of abuses in the Catholic Church.
- Now, 500 years later, the church is in a new time of upheaval. We do not know what is next. We live in a time where information bombards us constantly and much of what worked in the past no longer works for us. As a result, church as we have known it is shrinking in the northern hemisphere and is finding all sorts of new expressions.

For those who long for the church of your childhood, I’m sorry to tell you, it will never be again. For the churches who hold to the

Seven Last Words of the Church: “But we’ve always done it that way” – I have good news and bad news. We’ll start with the bad news. Your church died the week before last. The good news is that these are exciting times to be the church. Do we know what is happening around us? Not really. Do we have an important role to play in the future? You bet we do!

Look at the world around us. To say that “it is a bit of a mess” is an understatement. In the past, the church has had a voice for change. We still have that voice. There are a lot of us.

Paul told the church at Colosse, “Remember to keep Jesus at the center.” We have to be connected; stay connected, invite others to connect with us.

Being a Christian is not rocket science. Neither is it a spectator sport or a solo sport. Here at Tosa Avenue, we are being called to connect with our God AND our community. This week our kids are going to be learning what it means to be a Christian as they attend Vacation Bible School. What will you learn about being a Christian this week? How will you connect/reconnect with God? How will you embrace and live into the change that is our church in this age? What are you willing to “sell” at the “every 500-year rummage sale” as we move forward into God’s preferred future for us?