

“Stepping into the Breach”

Mark 9:30-37; Isaiah 58:9b-14a – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Reconciliation Ministry Worship Emphasis

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might embrace a faith bold enough to follow Jesus into the breaches in our world. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

Sometimes it's the words of scripture that offer us the lessons we need; sometimes it's the silences. With the benefit of 2000 years of hindsight, we can read that Jesus told his disciples that “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again,” and have a pretty good idea of what he meant. But according to Mark, “they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

I wonder though, were they completely confused? Or did they have some inkling of what he was getting at, and their fears about what he was saying were the real reason they didn't want to ask him to say more? Because just a couple verses later, we have another silence. They arrive in Capernaum. “What were you arguing about on the way?” Jesus asks, as if he had no idea. “But they were silent,” Mark writes, “for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.” They were embarrassed because they had learned at least enough from Jesus to know that he wasn't going to approve of their need to prove themselves the greatest. I don't think it was a surprise that he then spoke to them about service and humility and sacrifice and hospitality. That's why I wonder if they were really as dense as Mark implies, when Jesus was

warning them about what was going to happen to them, or if they just didn't want to know. They had some idea that all this hanging out with Jesus was going to make their lives different than they were before; they just weren't ready for everything to be that different.

Are we? When it comes down to it, that 2000 years of hindsight may not be the advantage we assume it to be. Embracing the depth of the difference hanging out with Jesus can bring to our lives is a lesson we are continually having to learn and re-learn. We don't really like being different. We have a strong instinct toward self-preservation. We like being comfy and unbothered. While we may all have our own neuroses about taking compliments and being the center of attention, we generally enjoy being well-thought-of and held in esteem. Disciples R Us! And I don't mean that in a good way. There's a reason we come to church every week. It's because the whole rest of the time, the world is trying to convince us that following a guy who was betrayed and denied and crucified doesn't make any sense. That is clearly the loser path. You don't want to be a loser; you want to be a winner. So why would you listen to this dude?

But then we come back to church, and God is saying, "Yes, I want you to go where the other people aren't going. I want you to love the people other people aren't loving. I want you to stand up and say the things other people won't say. Because that is how we heal the world. That is how we restore the beloved community. That is how we repair the breach. And I promise it will be worth it. You shall be like a watered garden, whose waters never fail."

And even though we have our doubts, there is some part of us, some hopeful little fragment of our soul that wants to believe it, that wants to throw in with this loser and see what happens. That bit about getting killed sounds scary, but technically, it turned out okay, so maybe we'll stick a toe in and watch where things go. Except that following Jesus isn't really something we can do with just a toe. Discipleship is not a spectator sport. There is a breach, and God is calling us to repair it, not simply observe it.

“Repairers of the Breach” is the theme of our Reconciliation Ministry emphasis this year. So what about that breach? What is a breach? You may be most familiar with the word, if not from this passage from Isaiah 58, then because of the line “Once more unto the breach, my friends” even if you aren't sure where that comes from. It's Shakespeare, of course, like most common phrases that aren't the Bible. In the third act of Henry V, the king is trying to rally his troops to finally and decisively win the battle against the French. He's talking about a breach that is a literal gap in a wall, a gap that has been hacked out by force.

Other times when we talk about stepping into a breach, we're referring to someone stepping up to do something that no one else is doing, either because the person who was doing it before no longer can or simply because nobody else is willing. When we talk about a breach, we're talking about a situation where vulnerability has emerged; it's a weak spot, in a city's fortifications or an organization's functionality. Or, if we look more closely at this passage from Isaiah, a breach is the vulnerable part of our community, the gaping wound that threatens the wellbeing of all, even though most of

us would prefer to ignore it and minimize its impact. This is the kind of breach that cries out for repair, the kind of breach God is calling us to address. This isn't one of those instances of God being mysterious or speaking in riddles; the prophet is very clear about how to work on the problem: offer food to the hungry, satisfy the needs of the afflicted, remove the yoke of bondage and all false representations of justice.

And what's more, there is specific mention of how we work to repair the breach as a community of faith. Be here in my house with my aims in mind, says God, not your own preferences about what to do when you get together. If you're going to be here on Sunday, invoking my name and my blessing, make sure that it's my Word you're carrying into the world the rest of the week. There is a difference between following Jesus and carrying around his image like a mascot. Being a Christian ought to mean we live our lives differently. Following Jesus means we're willing to step into the breach, to name the broken places in our society, not with judgment but with compassion, to speak out against injustice even if it favors us, to love those others have declared unlovable.

Jesus is interested in neither our claims of greatness nor our false modesty; what he wants is faithfulness to the call to serve the least and the last. Not just to feed the hungry, but to keep asking why there are so many hungry. Not just to visit those in prison, but to question the systems that keep so many locked up. Not just to welcome the adorable children who occasionally appear in our midst, but to care for the dirty, hungry, endangered children all around the globe. Jesus is calling us into the gap, to stand where others won't, to speak up for those the world ignores, to put ourselves into

the vulnerable places alongside those whose absence wouldn't otherwise be noticed when they disappear.

Are we any more willing to go there than those first disciples? Are we going to keep silent and not ask for more information? Are we going to change the subject and share pictures on our phones of the shiny, bright parts of our lives rather than looking at the brokenness head on? When will we begin to notice that such reluctance leads us into parched places? When will we see that Jesus actually went that way, while we wandered off in our own direction?

Can we commit to the beloved community? If we "keep coming back," as our twelve-step friends say, we can continue to encourage one another to faithfulness. If we keep gathering here and letting the words of life pour into our souls, we can gain the courage to follow a crucified Lord. If we keep coming to this table, we will find the nourishment we need to follow the road less traveled. Our light shall rise in the darkness, and our gloom will be like the noonday. Our bones will be made strong, and we will find delight in the Lord. We will find ourselves in the places of weakness, sharing the strength of God. Then the world will look at our different-ness and say with wonder, "they are repairing the breach!" Then we will join God in re-building the world. Hallelujah and Amen.