

Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 21, 2013
Dr. Stephen Brewer

“Off the Rim”

Acts 13:15-16, 26-33

John 10:22-30

On the wildflower hike yesterday we saw some beautiful caterpillars which reminded me of a story I heard once. A research scientist was doing an experiment about the way caterpillars establish their sense of direction. It turns out that, like ants, caterpillars follow the scent laid down by the caterpillar in front of them. The scientist, who had a half dozen of the critters, put them on the rim of an 4-inch flower pot which contained a lush plant – one of the caterpillar’s very favorite foods. The scientist guided the lead caterpillar around so that it picked up its own trail. The other five followed behind contentedly. Then the scientist left them alone and watched. The caterpillars went around and around the flower pot for seven days until they dropped off, one by one, having starved to death – all the time within two inches of the food which would have provided everything they needed for survival!

How easy it is to become misled, and not know it. While serving a church in California I attended a worship service at a nearby university. Of the people there, some were Christians, some were non-believers, some were believers in other faiths; some came to question and challenge, some came out of curiosity, and some came to worship.

Because of the diversity of those gathered, particularly with their expectations regarding the faith experience, the gathering was something like the crowds of folks Paul might have spoken to as he went on his missionary journey described in our reading from Acts today.

The account in Acts describes Paul in a part of what is present-day Turkey – Gentile country at the time. Paul’s situation was this: the primary religious authority to which he related – and his own religious background – was the Jewish community. In the earliest stages of his ministry, at least, Paul wasn’t thinking of abandoning Judaism and starting a new religion. He simply wanted his fellow Jews to believe that Jesus was the one they had been waiting for. Those who followed Jesus, “The People of the Way,” initially *all* were Jews, for remember, Jesus was a Jew and related to God and faith in Jewish ways.

We can only begin to understand what kind of impact Paul had on the religious community of his day if we translate what he began to do into terms that we present-day Christians might understand.

So imagine: what if a person who had spent many years ridiculing the church and trying to cause all kinds of serious harm to Christian believers announced one day that he had been suddenly converted, and was now going to be a spokesperson for the church all over the world? Do you think there might be just a little suspicion about this person’s credibility and integrity? I believe there would be. And, of course, this exactly describes the case with Paul and the early church. Paul had been an infamous persecuter of Christians, and suddenly decided he was called to be a Christian leader.

Then imagine that this same person – whom you had *very* reluctantly allowed to serve in a leadership position in the church – decided that many of the church’s customs and a good

portion of the church's theology was superfluous, and even got in the way of adding new members to the Christian roster.

For example, what if this person said that new converts to Christianity didn't need to study the history of the church, or believe in the Trinity or the Resurrection of Jesus? Or what if he said that new converts didn't need to bother learning what is in the Bible or have any idea that there might be a difference between Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox or Protestant Christianity? What if this person said it was silly to ask that new converts be baptized? Do you think these kind of ideas would meet with some resistance in the church today?

Well, this is very close to the kind of thing Paul was suggesting, except that Paul's ideas would have been even more offensive to First Century Jews.

The early church was Jewish, yet Paul argued that new members didn't have to study Judaism nor should they be required to observe Jewish law. Circumcision, for the Jews, is the symbol of entrance into the community of believers, holding a similar symbolic meaning that baptism does for Christians. Paul said it wasn't necessary. Even more disturbing was Paul's notion that those unclean, ungodly outsiders – the Gentiles – should be allowed into the community with full status.

Why was Paul making such radical suggestions? Why didn't he just go along with the way the Jewish/Christian community originally had been established, and leave things alone? Because he knew that much of the tradition of his own faith was getting in the way of understanding the radical message that Jesus brought. So Paul was willing – in fact he was *insistent* – that many Jewish traditions be set aside, for he believed that if this did not happen, the authentic faith Jesus introduced could not grow, but instead would shrivel up and die out.

. Paul reminded the church that their true source of nourishment was not their customs and traditions, but Jesus Christ. But whatever its merits, Paul's plan turned out to be a very disruptive and painful process, and the church at Jerusalem was dead set against it from the beginning.

After that worship service on campus some years ago, there was a discussion. One young woman, who identified herself as being non-Christian, sat patiently through the worship service, then listened to conversation about why those of us who were Christian found it meaningful to be part of the church. Her comment was:

“Everything you are saying is nice and good, and I don't devalue it, but all the things you have been describing I could get from belonging to any religion, or almost any secular organization, for that matter. I don't need to become a Christian for that.”

Then many of us realize that we had been talking only about the way the church works outwardly to make the world a better place. We had forgotten Jesus' teachings and his healing ministry and his life which demonstrated for us the love and presence of God. We had forgotten to describe how striving to live as Jesus taught us is at the center of all the church does for good.

I realized after her comment how important it is for us as Christians to keep close contact with the un-churched world. It is perhaps the best way for us in the church to keep our perspective; to step out of all our familiar patterns and ways of doing things in the church and see through someone else's eyes what the church looks like to the outside world. That's why I'm so happy about the Women's Fellowship getting to know a family that's part of Northwest Seasonal Workers. And about the work our church does through the Food Bank and Wednesday Night Live. These ministries express from the inside out why we are followers of Jesus and why we are part of this faith community.

Our congregation is in a position where we would benefit from increasing our numbers. Last week I suggested that living our day-to-day lives in a way that reflects the values of God is the most powerful tool we have for attracting new members. But—in the event that you succeed in this and someone actually says to you, “Tell me why you belong to First Presbyterian Church” – what would you say?

Imagine sitting down with an unchurched person to explain to them why the church is important. Or what if they asked why, if they *did* join a church, would they want to join our congregation? Where would you begin?

As I listened to that young woman at the university it occurred to me that the only place I could begin would be to tell her why being a follower of Jesus is more important to me than just about anything in my life. How odd that so often we take it for granted that the whole world knows why we are members of the church. But when someone is so bold as to ask, we may discover, to our horror, that we have forgotten why, ourselves.

Even with all the good work we do in reaching out, I fear that too often we in the church like those caterpillars. How often do we follow in the path made for us by those who came before, never questioning whether the path is leading where we want to be going; or, more to the point, whether or not the path is leading where God wants us to be going?

Like Paul, we are surrounded by many who ask us -- if not with words, then by their very absence from the community of faith, “Why *should* I come to church? What does Christianity offer that I can’t get just about any place?”

Of course, it’s much easier to leave things as they are; to leave such disturbing questions unanswered. But to seek a clear answer is to rediscover the life and joy and peace which is at the center of our faith. It is to rediscover the one who is for us the source of new life and hope and joy.

Grace, mercy and peace; amen.

Stephen Brewer
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