

My two younger sisters and I were raised in the Methodist Church, brought to worship every Sunday without exception, sent to Vacation Bible School in the summer, and to Youth Group in Senior High. And let me tell you, this was church the hard way – no Children’s Chapel or cloth bags with crayons and coloring pages. Just sitting in the pews while the minister droned on and on for at least 35 minutes. Mostly I have memories of staring out the windows, waiting for release.

This may have something to do with my NOT going to church once I left for college. My fall from religious practice distressed my mother, but think of the ways I could have rebelled that would have been a lot worse!

My relationship to faith and God changed when I was in my late twenties, and even though by that time I was a Family Physician, I left to go off to Yale Divinity School, to learn the things that Sunday School hadn’t taught. Ultimately I ended up ordained a priest, proving that God has a sense of humor.

You would think, would you not, that my parents, after all their work to raise me in the church, would be thrilled about these developments? Not so. Oh, they weren’t hostile to it, exactly. Just indifferent. My father’s only comment was, “You know, for someone educated in a profession where you can make a lot of money, you have interesting ways of not doing it.” I guess you can take your show on the road; but you can’t go home again, where they should know you best.

I bring this up to illustrate why I truly understand what happened when Jesus returned to preach in his home town synagogue. There was no talk about how nice it was to have one of their own bringing an important ‘word from the Lord’. Rather, there was a lot of critical muttering in the synagogue and they “...took offense at him. ...

'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? Is not this the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?..' When he lived here he was only a carpenter, not pretending to be a rabbi."

And when the family of Jesus was discussed, you may notice that there was no mention of a father, only of his mother, Mary. "Well, of course everyone always knew he was illegitimate. Folks in Capernaum may be impressed, but we know who he really is, just a nobody putting on airs!"

So in his hometown, "[Jesus] could do no deed of power, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief." Mind you, I think that even curing just a couple folks with the laying on of hands, is pretty wonderful. But such healings had never been the center of what Jesus came to do.

The reception in Nazareth did not stop the movement of the Kingdom of God. It may have actually served as a good illustration for the disciples, as Jesus sent them out two-by-two, to carry the preaching and teaching further afield. The lesson of the hometown synagogue was that the work could well be hard, and people might not listen. But they needed to keep going, to find those who wanted to hear the Good News. This is how the message has ultimately come down through centuries and millennia to us. What will we do with it?

At this moment, delegates from Episcopal Churches all across the United States are meeting in Austin, Texas, at the Triennial National Convention. They are wrestling with the church's usual problems of declining membership and loss of influence. They may bring forth yet another new program to try to recapture lost glory. I know they will be having the old fight over a possible new prayer book with updated liturgies.

One reporter for the Convention newspaper wrote of how the church tries to make things new by steam-lining: getting rid of outdated Commissions, redundant Processes and extra Meetings. But he notes that no sooner are this accomplished than someone sees a need for a new Advisory Group, another Special Council. This may be inevitable, because we've been doing it forever and it's what we know how to do.

I wonder if, like religiosity in Nazareth, we are so rooted in the past that Jesus cannot do any deeds of power among us? The movement that Jesus still brings is headed into the future, not the past of 'how things have always been'. And while the Convention might serve as a great parable for the stuck-ness of the institutional church, I think that this is equally true of us as individuals.

So I would invite you this morning to consider whether there is some part of each of our lives so entrenched in our past that it keeps God from moving us to something new. Has someone done you an injury which you just cannot let go, that keeps you tied to memories of pain and anger? Are you and I sometimes trapped by addictions or compulsions that imprison us, keeping us from the freedom to make healthy choices? Do you have regrets about some failure that seems to have kept life possibilities closed off to you?

The Gospel offers to free us from old ruts for a new path, but it turns out that we can't import our old ways unchanged into a future where the glory of God is at the center of everything. There is no part of our life that does not need to be offered up for God's healing if we are to be set free for the Kingdom.

It's not easy to let go of what we have known and lived with for years, or a life-time. Who would I be without that old resentment, those long-repeated behaviors, that fantasy of who I might have been if only I had made a different choice? In other words, who would I be if

I trusted God's unknown future rather than my own familiar past?
Who am I if I stop fishing the Lake of Galilee with my family and go
with this unknown person who calls me to follow?

We cannot know what will happen if we permit the spirit of Jesus
to sweep into the dark and dusty corners of our lives and make us
new. But if we can truly hear the one who calls, let ourselves see the
love in him offered to us, we could risk the journey into a future with
him. And that would make all the difference.