

Rules for the Road

James 3:13-4:8a

Mark 9:30-37

“He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’”

Two utterly contradictory things strike me as we begin another year together, our arms outstretched and open to receive the future and the freedom God is giving us in Jesus who is our home. The first has to do with the vulnerability of a community that actually follows Jesus in a world such as ours. The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church says that the church “is called to [follow Jesus] even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life.” I think very few churches live in this way. The second has to do with the inner security experienced by an itinerant community whose dwelling place and destiny are the love that God is.

What, then, are we to make of our vulnerability as followers of Jesus Christ and members of his church? You could say that vulnerability is the human condition of creatures who have been given the gift of mortal life. Yet our lives are determined, in part, by how we respond to our mortality. How much of our life do we spend trying simply not to die!

From the beginning, Jesus pulled no punches with the twelve when he spoke about being vulnerable to the death-dealing powers all around him. Three times he tells them that he is going up to Jerusalem where he will be handed over to religious and civil authorities, mocked, flogged, and killed. Only then will he rise again on the third day. Only then will death no longer will have power to separate us from the love that God is. But he is also saying to those who choose to follow him that they too will find themselves—*literally* will find themselves—as they walk straight into the clutches of the death-dealing powers of the world for the sake of the gospel. He is saying, “I am on my way to defeat death’s grip on you *so* that you will not *have* to spend your life saving your life, playing it safe, hedging your bets, hunkering down, securing your future, arguing with each other about who is the greatest or the first.” Or as Annie Dillard put our post-resurrection lives, “...you can walk fearlessly, eating what you must, growing wherever you can, like the monk on the road who knows precisely how vulnerable he is, who takes no comfort among death-forgetting men....”

The first rule of this road is to live fearlessly in the face of death, following him whose love has defeated death. The second rule of the road: You will find yourself along the way—*literally* find yourself--as you receive the most vulnerable into your outstretched arms. I think this is what Jesus meant when he took a little child into *his* outstretched arms and said to the disciples, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives not me but the one who sent me.” It is no coincidence that the word for child in Mark is the same word used in the Greek version of Isaiah for “suffering servant.” To receive a vulnerable child is to receive this suffering servant, this Messiah, this God-with-us.

Jesus is not being sentimental here, not talking about the way we cradle one of our own at the baptismal font unawares. To be blunt, a child in first century Greco-Roman culture was not considered human. In fact, children ranked just above slaves and just below women in the social order. When a child emerged from the mother’s womb, the father stood at a distance considering whether or not to take the child into his arms. Think of Joseph taking Jesus as his own! If the father refused the child, if the child appeared to be of no use to the family’s economic future, the child would likely be put out as garbage to be picked up (or not) by a stranger, who then would raise the child for profit as a slave or prostitute or beggar. As you might imagine, baby girls were the most vulnerable of all. And even though children were a blessing from God for the Jews, Jesus’ admonition implied that there was room for growth!

Speaking of room for growth, I am asking myself presently on the road with Jesus, “What of a non-white child seeking refuge in the 21st century Euro-American culture of this day?” Specifically, what strangers’ stretched out arms will ever receive 1200 vulnerable and indefinitely detained youth seeking refuge in this country; and when will 497 children still separated from their parents at the border be held again in a parent’s outstretched arms? All week, I have not been able to silence Ted Hearne’s relentless chant premiered by The Crossing in four sold out concerts last week. “These aren’t people. These are animals. These aren’t people. These are animals. These aren’t people. These are animals,” the singers chanted amid animal sounds, until one voice remained, the

voice of a child crying “Papa? Papa? Papa. Papa!” It comes down to one child, one set of stretched out arms. It comes down to our arms opened to the child on this road where we say we are following Jesus.

Perhaps you read last Monday in the Inquirer of the outstretched and vulnerable arms of a church down the Avenue that received a child and her parents twenty-seven years ago and is doing the same today for two more families. “Everything about that time of my life has influenced how I am, who I am and who I strive to be,” Luz Morales says of the sanctuary she was given by the First United Methodist Church of Germantown in 1984. “I see FUMCOG as this community—this family—that raised me and supported me,” Luz tells the Inquirer. “*At the time in my life when I was most vulnerable, there were strangers who were willing to take a risk for me.*” Now she is doing the same for refugees in Lyons as she manages communications for Ikea in southern Europe. The second rule of the road, Jesus says: We will find ourselves—*literally* find ourselves--as we receive the most vulnerable into our outstretched arms.

But Jesus said something more to the twelve that begins to get at the paradox of the security given to those who dwell in his love even as they leave home to follow him and get at the third rule of the road: no matter where you are along the way, make your home in his love. Not by chance, the root meaning of ethics is “dwelling or stall,” and so stability. Ethics, according to Christian ethicist Paul Lehman, has to do with the stability and security which are necessary if one is going to act at all, the stability and security indispensable to the living of human life. The security we are given when we dwell in his love and so act out of his love is not reducible to a static, monolithic, immovable set of absolutes that we can grasp. It is a love whose breadth and length and height and depth will surprise us at every turn in the road. “. . .the road that is clean contrary to all that you chose or contrive or desire,—that is the road you must take,” Martin Luther heard Jesus say to him. To that I call you and in that you must be my disciple.”

As they walked on the road to Capernaum with Jesus, the disciples had been arguing about which one was the greatest along the way. When they came to Capernaum, Jesus asked them what they had been arguing about. I imagine we would be as silent as they were if Jesus asked us that right now. Then he sat down, called them to him and said, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Pardon my sexism for a sentence or two as I say, on behalf of the twelve, that it took a real man then and it takes a real man now to be last of all and servant of all. To be sure, the disciples had already left their literal homes and families to follow Jesus. No doubt they were already feeling pretty low on the totem pole of status in society. But suddenly that seemed like the easy part.

Now Jesus was asking them to leave the social constructs which secured their identity in first century Palestine. I do not know what those constructs looked like exactly, but I am pretty sure they did not look like men holding babies or turning the other cheek or dining with publicans and sinners. It did not look like following a suffering servant who would be arrested, tortured and killed because the people he loved and the way he loved them threatened the social order. Put another way, to be a disciple of this Messiah was going to require them to trust that who they were had everything to do with the love to whom they belonged, in life and in death. It was going to involve dying to the arrogant self, the braggadocio self, the “I am the greatest” self they were talking about along the way. It was going to entail taking their place at the end of the line behind society’s so-called losers for Christ’s sake. In sum, the disciples’ security and identity from now on would be in loving as they had been loved by him *who was on his way to lay down his life for them*. Love creates the vulnerability and love constitutes the security of those who follow him.

I had the privilege this week of spending time with Elmarie Parker, our denomination’s regional liaison in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Elmarie spends much of her time leading groups from churches like ours to visit with churches whose vulnerability would defy our imaginations. At a presbytery gathering on Tuesday, she told a story that held in solution the gospel I am so inadequately trying to proclaim to you today. She and a small group from a church in Ohio had come to a border crossing between Lebanon and Syria. The Syrian border guard, a Muslim, after he had checked passports and visas, knew he was dealing with a group of Christians. He paused, looked up and said to them, “Let me tell you why Christians must stay in Syria and the Middle East. It is the way in which the church shares love that is the healing medicine for the nation.” The way the church shares love. May the way this church shares Christ’s love as we set out for another year together be healing medicine for this nation.