

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship
Anita Rediger
September 27, 2009

“Not One of Us”

I marvel that Amish buggies and 21st century cars and trucks share the same roads. After 28 years in this community, I guess that I’ve become accustomed to seeing horse-drawn buggies overtaken by 400 horsepower engines. As trucks roar by, the men hold on to their hats; the women’s capes whip across their shoulders. Thankfully, the horse (usually) literally takes it all in stride. However, I flinch when I see the close encounters of immense semi-trucks and families of folks filling every inch of a buggy, so many lives entrusted into the ability of one horse to “do the right thing.” Besides the small bit in the horse’s mouth which gives the driver some control over the animal, two small pieces of leather strategically placed near each of the horse’s eyes spare the horse from “too much” information. Take a look at the harness of an Amish buggy the next time you meet one. Ironically, blinders help the horse to see. Blinders are good if you need to trust your life to a horse.

However, if we speak of persons as “having blinders on” we don’t infer something positive. Instead, we think of narrow-mindedness or an unwillingness to see something in a new way. Yet, as frustrated as we may become with what seem to be the visible blinders of others, all of us wear them – they’ve been with us since childhood! It may be impossible to remove them completely, but we do have the choice to be aware of their presence and to consider what might lie beyond them. We can discipline ourselves to become conscious of our “default” settings, our “gut reactions,” our presuppositions about life and the angles of our world view. But, it doesn’t come easily or quickly! It’s a life-long journey.

This evening, our story offers a challenge for us to consider- not just the details of a single Gospel story, standing alone by itself – but the expectations and stories which we bring to our reading. As we join the disciples and Jesus on their journey to Jerusalem let’s pay more attention to the response and reaction of Jesus’ disciples rather than those overtly “being healed.” Let’s remember that we’re joining a journey which has already started. It may take us a while to “figure out” what might be happening and we might discover that we’re not all at the same place. Yet, isn’t that always how our lives intersect. And isn’t that part of the great adventure of following Jesus together?!

First, we’ll retrace their steps a bit to get the full impact of the account which was read for us this evening. In our last reading in Mark – three weeks ago – we heard the account of Jesus and his conversation with the Syrophoenician woman. It was an unlikely interaction which ultimately led to the healing of a child - an unlikely interaction, that is, in the acceptable circles of the culture of the day. This account was yet one more in the growing thread of stories emerging as a theme in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus – casting an expansive welcoming net across the peoples of Galilee and Judah, of Phoenicia and the

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship

Anita Rediger

September 27, 2009

Decapolis, Jew and Gentile alike – his boundary-breaking actions profoundly life giving to many, yet incredibly offensive to others.

Again and again, the sensibilities of the religious leaders have been dismayed. Over and over, the disciples have been puzzled by Jesus' actions and words. The disciples have been astounded as he paid attention to the cries of hurting people – rich and poor alike. He has baffled them with words that spoke of a very different future than they envisioned. (For they had great expectations of the Messiah!) From the disciples' point of view, Jesus needed to pay more attention to the people in power than crowds of poor peasants gathered on the hillsides. Since he didn't seem interested in that, they found themselves tangled up in arguments with the scribes and Pharisees – vying and posturing for power.

In the disciples' eyes, it seems like Jesus was taunting them with promise of the kingdom – when in the same breath he would say that great suffering was ahead - even death. They completely missed the promise of resurrection because the shocking words about suffering and death overpowered the disciples' ability to “hear.” It wasn't what they believed. It was “unbelievable!”(Mk. 8:31-9:1) (We, too, know this experience when hard news comes our way. We become unable to hear.) The script the disciples have in hand has different stage directions. This is not what anyone imagined when they hoped for Messiah. At least not anyone who viewed kingdom through the lens of empire and conquest!...the only lens - that up until their encounter with Jesus - the disciples had ever known. From childhood...the ethos of their community and culture.

One of my favorite encounters at Swiss Village happened several years ago and is a delightful example of the power of our pre-conceived notions. This series of events unfolded in Alpenrose, the specialty area for dementia care. With a dementia producing illness, our minds seek to process information as they always have, yet sometimes the conclusions are surprising. A few years ago, a miniature Schnauzer came to work each day with one of the Alpenrose staff persons. He was a delightful dog and brought joy all around. One of the women was especially fond of Roscoe – but to our dismay Flo believed Roscoe **not** to be a dog, but rather a cat. She would call to the “kitty” and he would come. Flo would talk about the nice “kitty” when he would sit beneath her chair. From time to time someone would say something to Flo about the kitty really being a dog, but that never really mattered. Flo always continued to call Roscoe a cat! We all became quite comfortable with Flo's perception of Roscoe.

I will never forget, however, the day when we were seated in a circle in the living area. Flo was sitting next to me when Roscoe came into the room to join us. He came over to Flo and she reached out to pat him. All of a sudden, with a rather quizzical look, she said, “**That kitty looks like a dog!**” I loved it!!! *Even with the information that the kitty*

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship

Anita Rediger

September 27, 2009

looked like a dog (and was a dog!!), for Flo, the dog remained a kitty! Isn't this how it works? We often can't/don't see things as they are; we see them as we want or expect them to be! "We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are." Even when we don't have dementia! What an important realization for each of us to consider!

For the disciples then, at least Peter, James and John, it must have seemed like a pleasant reprieve when some days later Jesus took them with him up a high mountain. At the mountaintop, Jesus was "transfigured" before them. Elijah and Moses appeared. Jesus was clothed in "dazzling white" clothing. It was glorious! ...much more to the disciples liking.

The message of the day, however, wasn't an invitation to a favored place or position. It was simply – a voice from a cloud saying -"This is my son, the Beloved; listen to him!" On the way home, Peter, James and John quiz Jesus about what the scribes say must happen next...again a hint into the disciples' formation of faith and the power which the established religious leaders have over them. They are still really "listening" to these voices – even as they are drawn to the message of Jesus. Why are they still listening to these voices? No wonder they are puzzled, unsettled...edgy. Their allegiance to "how things are" is being un-tethered by their growing encounters with Jesus.

Jesus and his disciples make their way down the mountain only to discover the others – surrounded by a great crowd – arguing with the scribes. Here they are again...arguing... Jesus asks "why are you arguing?" and a man steps forward to explain. He had come seeking healing for his son, a boy who "had a spirit that made him unable to speak." Since Jesus was away, he had asked the disciples to cast it out, but they had been unable to do it.

The disciples were unable to deal with a spirit who prevented the boy from speaking and hearing. (Mk. 9:25) But, why did this end up in an argument with the scribes? Perhaps the disciples were feeling chagrined, embarrassed, abandoned. Maybe the disciples felt that the scribes had interfered with their healing work. Maybe, like us, they just needed someone else to blame...After Jesus had healed the child they followed him into the house – not expressing delight for the young boy, but rather asking why they had not been able to deal with this spirit. Jesus simply gives them a short, pointed answer... "this kind can come out only through prayer."

What is this prayer that Jesus is talking about? Are these prayers for outcomes and success which would "look good" in the contest between competing organizations or world views or is this a prayer which invites the disciples to "listen" to the Beloved?

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship

Anita Rediger

September 27, 2009

Don't you wonder what the disciples "heard" when Jesus said this to them? What do we hear?

In this story of healing, the disciples are given opportunity to discover that they were attempting to confront a destructive power in another which they have not yet confronted in themselves. How could they hope to restore another to hearing and speech if they themselves were yet unable to listen to the voice of Jesus? Is it any wonder that they were unable to live in way of God's kingdom if they were still bound by rules of empire? Certainly, Jesus' act of healing is a gift to the boy and his father. Yet more importantly, it is a vivid object lesson for the disciples – a story which bears witness to the great struggle that comes in letting go of preconceived notions about who God is and how God acts.

Sometimes the struggle between these powers is so great that incredible conflict occurs within us. For the young boy, "after crying out and convulsing terribly, the silencing spirit came out, and the he was like a corpse, so that most of them thought that he was dead." Yet, it was then that Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand." Now he was ready to speak and able to listen; he was resurrected to new life, to a new way – a way without the violence of convulsions, consuming fire and suffocating waters.

Mark 9:30 "They went from there and passed through Galilee...Jesus continued to teach his disciples. For a second time, Jesus broaches the subject of his passion and resurrection. This time no one outright rebukes Jesus as Peter had the first time, but Mark records that they still did not understand what he was saying.

Traveling alongside the disciples, we've witnessed Jesus' healing acts. We've listened in to his teachings on the road. Now, we arrive with them in Capernaum. But we're met with a disappointing question. Upon arriving at their place of lodging, Jesus doesn't simply ask the disciples, "What were you talking about as we traveled?" No he asks, "What were you arguing about on the way?" Silence...Finally a response to Jesus' question: yes, they had been arguing and it was an argument over who among them was the greatest. Jesus sits down, gathers the twelve around him and taking a little child into their circle he says to them "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." - one more gentle, tender teaching about the way of the kingdom in contrast with the way of empire. (Remember Ken Hawley's contrast of the two triumphal entries.)

John's immediate response however, demonstrates the great difficulty which we have in grasping this new way for he says...right on the heels of this teaching... "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him...we tried to stop him – not because he was casting out demons in your name, but "*because he was not following us.*"

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship

Anita Rediger

September 27, 2009

The journey into the kingdom continues – for the first disciples and for us – disciples of Jesus today.

“When the student is ready, the teacher will be provided.”

As the disciples followed Jesus on the way to Jerusalem they were coming face to face – over and over again-with the incredible tension between deeply-seated patterns of territorial, colonizing understandings and the way of Jesus. The many healing stories – the healing of the blind and of the deaf – offer poignant paradigms of the ongoing healing offered to the disciples -the truly blind and deaf as portrayed by the Gospel of Mark.

The disciples are so much like us! Aren't we like them! They were following Jesus, but at the same time struggling to let go of the old models of conquest and crusade...what I call attempts to imperialize the kingdom!

Last Sunday evening, we were watching a football game when an ad which I only casually started to watch unfolded before me. I may not have it right, but this is what I think I saw - the image of a football game; a muddy, hard-hitting game. The ball players were dressed in their helmets and pads, but covered in mud and grime...the scene began to jump back and forth and suddenly the helmets and pads were replaced by men wearing helmets of a different nature. The football players “morphed” into men wearing battle fatigues and carrying weapons slogging through mud and jungle...they were now Marines ready for war... Our culture very subtly seeks to draw a spirit of conquest into every part of our lives...even sport...even church...think about it...remember the bible school theme based on Operation Desert Storm? Or the nuclear submarine with the suggested name of “Corpus Christi?” (the Body of Christ)

With incredible patience Jesus goes before us as teacher and model of the way of the kingdom. We enter the story – right where we are, alongside of others who are right where they are...Jesus walks with us, drawing us into new understandings, loving us, challenging us, sticking with us...over and over, again and again.

Emmaus Road companions...what a joy it is for me to share my journey of faith with you...may each of us offer ourselves and our fellowship to the continued, ongoing healing ways of Jesus. Our old patterns will emerge again and again. Let's commit ourselves to remain on the journey, welcoming others as they come alongside. We're on a journey, a healing journey - and the teacher is always at hand. AMEN

“It is easier to get the people out of Egypt than to get Egypt out of the people.”

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-African Proverb