

*We Make the Road by Walking:
Getting Lost, Being Found
Genesis 3:6-13, Matthew 18:1-4*

We're taking our time in the early part of this long walk that will make a road for us and for our children. In this first month of the journey we've been getting our bearings, noticing the landscape around us, checking what's in our backpacks by paying attention to the stories of those who have come before us. Our memories include recent stories and some ancient ones, like the ones we read this morning from the books of Genesis and Matthew. When we come together, we re-tell these stories. We mine them for their meaning; because they remind us of who we are and why we're walking in this direction, and about how we'll make the next decision when there's a fork in the road or a big boulder that blocks our way. All three of the stories we heard this morning had in them something about being lost...because we all get lost from time to time.

In the Genesis story, first Eve and then Adam ate the one fruit that God told them was not fit for human consumption. We talked about that a couple of weeks ago: how toxic that fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil can be. Today's story told us what happened to Adam and Eve after they ate. Even before God confronted them, they began to feel bad about themselves. They felt naked, vulnerable, exposed; they looked for ways to hide themselves. They covered their bodies with leaves, and then when God asked them what happened, they covered their shame by blaming someone else. "She did it first," Adam said. "The snake made me do it," Eve defended.

There's an old Jewish *midrash*—a story that fills in the gaps in the Biblical text—that says that it wasn't their eating the fruit that made God angry; what God couldn't stand was Adam and Eve's unwillingness to take responsibility for their actions. That it was their readiness to blame someone else for what went wrong that turned them away from God and out of the garden. It's an ancient story, but it's as true today as it was then. When we are ashamed—when we *know* that we're not enough, when we feel wounded or embarrassed or inadequate in some way, we too tend to look somewhere else for who's responsible. We blame or take control or calculate someone else's weakness. It makes us feel better about ourselves. And *that's* when we begin to really get lost.

That's exactly what the disciples did in the story we read from Matthew this morning. By the time this story happens in the Gospel, the disciples were not new to Jesus; they'd been with their spiritual teacher for quite a while. They'd heard his teachings, watched his miracles, seen the people he ate dinner with. In contemporary terms, they've been going to church for years. They know the stories; they've heard the sermons; they've served on all the committees. They especially knew that there was this "kingdom of heaven" that Jesus kept talking about. But they were too embarrassed to admit that they weren't sure what he meant when he said that. (They wanted to ask: where *is* the kingdom of heaven, exactly?) So they asked Jesus another question, a question they thought they knew the answer to, a question that they thought would make them feel like their confusion didn't matter. "Who is the *greatest* in the kingdom of heaven?" they asked. Secretly, they were sure that the answer make it clear that no matter how confused they felt, they were better off than everybody else.

But Jesus didn't answer the way they expected. He looked at whichever one of those twelve asked the question in the same way he would look at you or me--with eyes that penetrate much deeper than you ever wanted anyone to see. And then he did the strangest thing: he held out his arm to hug a child who was playing in the dirt nearby—not one of *the* disciples' children—not one of those really cute, above-average, precocious children—just a nameless, run-of-the-mill child with dirty hands and a runny nose, a kid who had not even caught anyone's eye until that moment. Jesus said, "Truly (which is biblical language for 'I really want you to listen to me here'), *unless you change and become like a child, you will never even get into the kingdom of heaven.*"

Which had to be a shock to those disciples. It must have felt like a reprimand. They thought it was a *given*, that they were all in, that they were on the road to heaven, that they had Jesus' approval already. I have no doubt their defense mechanisms kicked in. Silently they began that mental come-back we all do. "Look around you, Jesus—at least *we're* paying attention. And you're saying we might not even *get into* the kingdom of heaven? *Children?* Really? You think this is *easy?*" His answer left them feeling lost. At that moment they *were* lost—encased in their defensiveness and hurt.

What *was* Jesus saying to them when he said "you must change and become like a child?"

It strikes me as significant that Jesus didn't say, you must *be* like a child. He said you must *change and become* like a child. Is it possible that Jesus' focus was not on the *age* of that little human being he grabbed, but on the *becoming* part? Maybe Jesus was saying, to live like you belong to the kingdom of God, you have to *change and become* the way a child changes and becomes—which is to say, constantly. All the time.

Children are always changing, always becoming something other than what they have already been. They simply take for granted that they can get lost from time to time. It never even occurs to them that they won't need someone to come and find them, and to show them where to go next. Maybe this is the model—their willingness to be found and re-directed, to *become*—that Jesus was calling us all to remember and to hold onto.

I have a step-grandson named Dylan. A handful of years ago, when Dylan was four, I had lunch with him and his parents in a restaurant. In the space of an hour-and-a-half, Dylan got into a mild form of trouble probably about 23 times. He dropped his silverware, and then his plastic cup, from the table onto the floor. He *threw* his toys on the floor. His body slid off the chair onto the floor. He got embarrassed once because he thought we were laughing at him, and when he reacted in a way that seemed to me entirely reasonable—by telling us all he didn't like us any more—his parents made him apologize. Every time one of those things happened, Dylan took whatever discipline was doled out to him; and because he's a very good kid, he complied and went on. He wasn't counting how many times he was being told to change his behavior. He didn't resent his parents for not accepting him just as he was. Unconsciously, Dylan was doing what most children do: submitting to the correction of someone he loves and trusts, without any pretension that he was already complete or perfect. If he got lost 23 times during that lunch, he also got found 23 times; re-directed, put back on the path that someone who loved him knew he needed to be on.

How different that is from the way most of us react to the suggestion that we need to change. I am stung by anything that feels like criticism of the way I have already been doing things. I am quick to blame someone else for making me uncomfortable. It's like I am made of glass—brittle—as if I will break if I bend too far. Unlike Dylan, I am highly skeptical that anyone who asks me to change my mind or change my behavior understands me or has my best interest at heart. If God has anything in mind for me that's better or bigger than what I already am; if I am being invited to grow through my most difficult relationships with other people or the unplanned circumstances of my life, God must find me very difficult to work with.

And the truth is, change—becoming something more than we are right now—is necessary for all of us. Over time, we all tend to get fixed in a particular way of being. We only see the path that stretches out in a straight line from where we are right now. But God's path curves. Sometimes it even takes sharp turns. When we get so comfortable with our own sense of right and wrong that we're sure we've got God's point of view, there's almost certainly something new for us to learn. None of us is yet all that God would hope for us to become. We too get lost; we too need to be found...over and over again.

God never *forces* us to change. The only way God makes us do anything differently is to let us live with our mistakes—our *lostness*--until we are sick of ourselves, sick of the consequences of our own actions. This is the opposite of control. God's way requires a learner on the other end. Real change—transformation—happens only if we can develop that childlike openness and humility that Jesus was pointing to in the child who scrambled onto his lap. I think it was that quality of humility—an openness to correction and re-direction—that Jesus wanted to hold up for his disciples and for us; a quality that is so much harder for adults than it is for children. Adults must *re-learn* that humility, because most of us gave it up long ago, under the pressure of living in a world where we are rewarded for confidently putting our best and most invulnerable foot forward at all times.

Change is not something we can master. We can try to whip ourselves into shape, and improve ourselves with self-discipline and the power of positive thinking, but I don't think that's what Jesus was talking about. In fact, I'm pretty sure it isn't. To live with the humility of a child—to live as one who belongs to the kingdom of God—is to forget about trying to make yourself into a good person. It's to simply trust yourself into the hands of Someone who is trustworthy and who wants you to be whole. To not resist when the hardest moments and relationships of your life make a dent in your polished exterior. To listen, and then respond with willingness and courage and humility, when you are being pulled into new places that are a little bit—or a lot—frightening. To have a sense of wonder—maybe even to get excited—about being re-shaped as a new path opens and you start walking, in a direction you have never before thought of as yours.