

April 29, 2018

"The Journey"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 1:14-20

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A couple of Tuesdays ago, on April 17th, Southwest Airlines Flight 1380 was scheduled to go from New York's LaGuardia Airport to Dallas, Texas. As usual, everyone expected this to be just another routine flight like the thousands that happen each and every day. But then one of the two engines blew up and the captain of the airplane, Capt. Tammie Jo Shults, radioed ground control that there was a hole in the aircraft, and that someone was sucked out of a broken window, and that she was landing the plane at the nearest airport.

The crew of Flight 1380 had its hands full – a catastrophic engine failure, rapid decompression of the aircraft, and serious injury and death to passengers, is no pilot's idea of a routine flight. But despite what you've probably seen online or on television, the plane was never in any real danger of crashing. Because, you see, the captain, in an outstanding display of cool and calm demeanor, did exactly what she was trained to do, exactly what she was expected to do. And the plane landed without further incident. The only thing really unusual about this whole event is that this pilot was a woman. Now you know I never play the gender card here in the pulpit. But I'll share a little factoid with you... women make up less than 7% of all the commercial pilots. And, regarding this pilot in particular, she's even more unique in that she also happened to be the Navy's first female F-18 fighter pilot, landing on aircraft carrier decks no less. (As Steve Adams can tell you, being an ex-Navy pilot himself, this is no simple task!) Now imagine for a moment becoming a female fighter pilot, then a captain for a major airline in what has always been a man's club. Imagine what a difficult journey, what a difficult road, that had to have been, probably filled with prejudices, obstacles and uncertainties! Yet this woman overcame them all, and the end result is that through her commitment and training and competence she was able to affect, and save, so many lives. And that's what I want to speak to today. How we, you and I might affect, and maybe even save, some lives as we journey down our own roads in this life. Perhaps not in the same dramatic fashion as Capt. Shults, but in a way that will still have a lasting, maybe even everlasting, influence on those we touch.

Now Mark Twain once declared that clothes make the man. He said, "Naked men have had little or no influence on society." Because we do indeed have this tendency today to think of our influence in mostly materialistic terms. How much power, prestige, or especially "things" we have garnered in our

journey down life's road. But if we step away from the world for a moment, we all know the most important journey we'll ever take in this life... and that's our spiritual journey. So let's consider that for the next few minutes. Obviously, there's the eternal significance of our spiritual journey. That's the final outcome of our journey – living in heaven with God! But what about the here and now? Well, let's start with the fact that your sitting in these pews today in the first place. Did you ever really think about why that is? What got you here, besides, maybe, your mother?

Well, I think we'll find the short answer in today's scripture reading. We hear Jesus asking Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John to go on a journey with him. He called to them, “Come. Follow me. The Kingdom of God has come. I need your help. Follow me.” And, we’re told, they immediately left to follow him. Hmmm! I find that interesting. They immediately left. Unfortunately, the Gospels never tell us anything about the inner feelings, the doubts, the questions, in the hearts and minds of those first disciples. But, apparently that's really not important, because the story of the calling of disciples is not so much about who they were, but about who they became once they began to follow Jesus. And we all know how great they became. Not in power or prestige, but in spirit and in bearing fruit and affecting lives. And that exact same truth applies to you sitting here today.

Because, we are all called to be modern day disciples. We are all called to continue the work of growing God’s kingdom here and now. You see, the fact is, that from the very beginning, Jesus chose not to save the world all by himself. God apparently doesn't want to do God's work alone. So he chooses people to work with him. And that's a key point. To be a follower of Jesus is more than something that you decide for yourself. If you're a follower of Jesus down this road of life, this journey, it's because he chose you to walk with him. You were called. As Jesus even told his disciples, "You didn't choose me, I chose you." I chose you to bear fruit in my name. And somewhere along the line, Jesus said to each one of you, “Follow me.” And...you answered the call. So that addresses my original question. That's why you're sitting here. You were chosen!¹ And when you really think about it, isn't it a privilege, an honor to be called by and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. To think that Jesus has faith in you to call you as his disciple, to bear fruit and affect lives for him. There’s another “wow” moment!

¹ "Why Jesus," Will Willimon

Now being a disciple of Jesus doesn't necessarily mean you're going to be assured of an easier life. In fact, sometimes it's even going to be more difficult because you're now working for Jesus. I'll give you a very recent, specific example. How many of you worked at the rummage sale this past week... or month... or year? Or, how many of you serve on committees? How many of you have made a commitment to the music program? How many of you have worked in the kitchen? How many of you have performed those tasks of teaching, counting, cleaning, maintaining, setting up, and so much more. You know exactly what I'm talking about. But despite all the work, I can't imagine, and I'm sure you feel the same, a greater gift and blessing than that of our Christian faith, rooted in the community and fellowship of this body of Christ called John Wesley. It's like that beautiful old hymn goes, "Blessed be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love, the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above."

And it is this community of love and fellowship that strengthens and encourages us on our journey to be disciples in this modern day world. And God knows we are needed in this time and place based on declining church statistics and where our society seems to be heading – where so much of the world thinks Jesus as out of place and nonsensical. And we can see the result. Just let me give you another very recent, specific example. The death of thirty-two year old police officer Sean Gannon is still fresh on my mind. How his family will have to bear such a difficult burden for such a long time. And it makes me wonder about the childhood of his murderer. How could this man be so morally bankrupt to have been arrested one hundred and twenty-five times, beginning at age seventeen. It also begs the question – what kind of society tolerates and perhaps even encourages behavior like this? In a Chicago Tribune essay entitled *Moral Poverty*, editor John DiJulio wrote, "Moral poverty is the poverty of being without loving, capable, responsible adults who teach you right from wrong. It is the poverty of being without parents and other authorities who teach you to feel joy at another's joy, pain at another's pain, happiness when you do right, and remorse when you do wrong. It is the poverty of growing up in the virtual absence of people who teach morality by their own everyday example." And that's where being a disciple makes all the difference. Because it is the way we live our everyday lives that affects other people. That's how we influence our family, our friends, our colleagues, our acquaintances. By what we say, and how we say it. By what we do, and the love with which we do it. You answered the call, but your spiritual journey continues. Yes, just like those first disciples, we also are called to bear much fruit. St. Paul specifically puts a name on this fruit. It's called love, it's called joy, it's called peace, it's called patience, and kindness, and goodness, and faithfulness and self-control. Yes, brothers and sisters,

we can make a difference, we can affect lives, we can grow the Kingdom of God in a time and place that so desperately needs disciples to make a difference.

Yes, all of us here on planet earth are on a journey. And there are many roads going many different places. That's why we must continue to heed the call of the One who said, "Follow me." Let me close with this. Back in nineties, Pope John Paul was at a Catholic youth event in Bologna, Italy, where pop star, Bob Dylan got up to sing the song, *Blowin' in the Wind*. Most of you will remember – how many roads must a man walk down...the answer is blowin' in the wind. After the song, Dylan went over to the Pope, and the two men shook hands and exchanged a few words. Then the Pope stepped up to the microphone and, as described by an observer, 'took the singer to the theological cleaners.' "You say the answer is blowing in the wind, my friend," the Pope said. "So it is. But it is not a wind that blows things away, it is the wind that is the breath and life of the Holy Spirit, the voice that calls and says, 'Come! Come! And follow me'." A thunderous applause greeted these words, and the pope continued, "You ask me, how many roads must a man walk down before he becomes a man? I answer: One! There is only one road for man, for a woman, and it is the road of Jesus Christ, who said I am the Way and the Truth and the Life." Amen.