

EVIDENCE FROM WITHIN
Rev. Gary Magarrell August 30, 2009

Can you believe that we are experiencing the last weekend of August in 2009? While we can look forward to Labour Day long weekend next week, we are nevertheless on the cusp of the beginning of our fall church year. Everything gears up and we will be off and running.

Some of us are getting our breath after an exciting Vacation Bible School this week. We had 15 children attend, maybe not as many as we would like, but an important event. Next year we need to work at our publicity within a few blocks of the church facility to ensure everyone knows about it.

Our VBS theme was Walking With Jesus, a wonderful theme for children and adults. The children stepped through a time machine to meet some of the great characters of Jesus' day and to hear of their journeys.

First we met Mary, the woman chosen while she was young to be the mother of Jesus. Mary told her story of how she and Joseph made the tough trip to Bethlehem where Jesus was born. With amazement she spoke of the shepherds and the three kings coming to see Jesus. Then the story of fleeing to Egypt for safety so no one would harm the baby. Jesus spent his first couple of years as a refugee.

Day 2 we met with Mary again and she spoke of the journey she, Joseph and 12 year old Jesus took to the temple in Jerusalem. On the way home she realized Jesus was missing and they went back and found him in dialogue with the leaders of the temple. Jesus began young to debate with religious leaders of his time.

Day 3 we met Peter who spoke of his journey with Jesus and told of some of the wonderful experiences of witnessing Jesus healing the sick in so many different locations. We concentrated on the story of the four friends who lowered their disabled friend through a roof to Jesus' feet for healing. They were intrigued by Jesus' question to the crippled man: "Do you want to be well?"

Day 4 we met with believers and walked with them on Palm Sunday into the city behind Jesus on a donkey. Then we later journeyed to the Upper Room for the Last Supper. We watched Jesus wash the disciples' feet and break bread and share wine with them on his last night before his arrest. Finally we walked on Easter Sunday with the disciples, Mary Madeline and the women towards the empty tomb and met the resurrected Jesus on to the Road to Emmaus.

As an aside, there was one thing we spoke about which the older children found fascinating. We were discussing Jerusalem, its walls and its magnificent Solomon's temple. I asked them to describe what they thought the gates to the city looked like. After the descriptions of the great size of the gates, I told them of one special gate in the wall. This gate was very small and was named "The Eye of the Needle Gate." You have to get

down very low and crawl through. The soldiers who guard the city built this gate low so that if someone was coming to invade the city, this gate would be the hardest one to get through.

Jesus remembered this gate. He said something later about getting a camel through the eye of a needle – everyone laughed because you can not stuff a camel through here. But Jesus was talking about how some people love their riches more than God, more than sharing or caring about other people: easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than to enter the Kingdom of God.

I have a wall hanging made by a very devout artist friend made of beautiful material. This portrays a stylized church with a very short door. When I commented on this, he told me of the church in his home town which resembled this and had a very short door so you had to stoop to enter. He was raised on the Serbian border. When the area was under the Turkish Ottoman Empire, this enabled the Christians to defend their church from marauders and soldiers.

Is it not interesting to know what lies behind these sayings and these religious art designs?

So, our VBS spoke of Our Journey with Jesus – it is our journey, is it not, as we invite Jesus to walk with us on our life journey.

Today we heard readings from the Letter of James and from the Gospel of Mark, both of which are teachings which point to how we relate to God and how what we have to offer to the world can only be what we have experienced within our hearts.

James was a very early church leader who worked primarily out of Jerusalem. He was steeped in the Judaic laws and had been a devoted Jew, proud of Hebrew history and the Law of God which he had followed. Jews who became baptized and followed Christ were very comfortable with James' leadership whereas Gentiles who became Christians often resonated more towards the leadership of Peter and Paul.

James was very concerned about church order and establishing the Christian church on a firm foundation. He tried to bring all Christians together to work in harmony and peace. He was loath to stray too far from the Jewish tradition and initially preferred non-Jewish converts to Christ to be circumcised as well as baptized.

In our passage read from his letter, James continues his warnings to Christians to be careful with temptation that leads to doing evil. Do not let yourself be deceived, he said, in thinking that temptation comes from God when in fact you are tempted when you are lured and enticed by our own desires.

This is where we picked up the reading. James goes on to reiterate that every good endowment of talent we have and every perfect gift we experience is from God. Of God's own free will, James repeats, God has made us the blessed ones in creation.

Listen to what he said next: “be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger as anger does not advance the cause of God’s righteousness.” It all sounds so simple does it not? Listen more than you speak. For many of us this is beyond difficult; it is nigh impossible! Let us each think of how we do in this admonition to listen more than we speak. Have you ever found yourself really not listening to another while you formulate your comeback or rebuttal?

Listening takes energy – yet we need to honestly listen to what we hear from another and also from God. So much misunderstanding happens because we hear what we want to hear rather than what was truly said.

Be careful with anger James goes on to say. Anger gets in the way of so much – forgiveness, understanding, friendship, work and family life. Our reason is clouded by anger and we hear ourselves making statements we wish we had not said. Once an angry word is across our lips, it takes on a life of its own and we can not pull it back.

James suggests Christians need to work hard on their reactions to others and to try to be conscious of the ramifications of what they do and say in order to foster community and family life.

Then he goes on to say “Be doers of the word not hearers only.” Both James and Paul spoke of the necessity to get on with something. A Christian can not isolate himself or herself so as not to fall into temptation. Rather, the test of ones faith is how it is lived out each day in the world in which we find ourselves in spite of the temptations. If we become doers, then God will bless us in the doing.

Note here that James is not talking of busyness for the sake of busyness or so we can look busy and occupied. Rather, James is exhorting a Christian to be out there even if they do not feel totally confident as their faith is so new. It is out in the world in the midst of God’s creation that we will meet God.

Our reading from the Gospel of St. Mark chapter 7 is very important in the growth of understanding of what Christ sees is important in a follower. Here we have the Pharisees complaining to Jesus about the men and women who follow him. We tend always to say negative things about the Pharisees but they were people who felt strongly about their need to follow God’s laws as outlined in the first five books of the Old Testament. These laws would keep them from defiling their faith and become separated from the God they wanted so badly to follow. So, we should have some sympathy for these men who worked so hard at their faithfulness to the rules.

They came to Jesus and complained they had seen some of the disciples eat without ritual washing of their hands. Why do you allow this act of sacrilege!

Jesus quotes the Prophet Isaiah: “This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me.” What you are doing said Jesus to the Pharisees

is to follow the traditions of man not the commandment of God.” In other words, know why you are doing something and be suspect if it excludes you from others who also are reaching out to God. It is important for us to understand that Jesus had admiration for the **faithfulness** of the Pharisees. However, they allowed that very faithfulness to the Law to separate them from others. It also caused them to see themselves as an elite group in the faith. It is not God who has asked you to do all these things, Jesus warns, for these are the laws of man. Be careful that your very devotion does not cut you off from those around you who also are creatures of God.

Then Jesus follows this up by saying: “Hear me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him.”

James, Peter, Mark and Paul valued so much these sayings of Jesus, for they were dealing with Jews and Gentiles, people new to the faith. Many of these new believers had previously been dedicated people to God, following various rituals. Jesus made it clear that we could not curry God’s favour by being pious and standing apart from others. God looks into the heart and beyond the rituals and knows us as a man or a woman in our nakedness.

“What comes out of a man is what defiles a man” said Jesus, “for from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man.”

Jesus never let anyone off the hook did he? Do not tell me there was nothing you could do about your relationship with others. Ask for forgiveness of your actions and pray for the gift of wisdom to enable you to learn and change to reflect the teachings of God.

One of the great things about Jesus, that which made him so popular with the average person and so unpopular with the religious and political elite, was his fundamental belief that God created all creation and it was not only good but had the potential to remain good. All was created by God and equal in God’s eyes. It is what you have in your heart that counts not who you are by chance of birth, financial success, gender or position of power.

Jesus did not fit into any known mould in his day. Though he was an informed Jew who knew and could quote the holy scriptures, understanding the rituals of his faith heritage, Jesus was determined to help people understand that there were no exclusions of anyone before the throne of God, the same God who had created the universe and all that there was and is.

So, we learn that our inner self is more critical to God than our external trappings or attempts to create an illusion of piety and holiness. God calls on us to be truthful first to ourselves that we might seek God’s assistance to change and secondly to be open to the love and support of others as we journey in faith together.