



June 24, 2007

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Luke 8:26-39

“Jesus never says ‘You First’”

(Read: Luc 8:33-39 en francais)

Did anyone understand what I read? It’s just a portion of the Gospel passage for this date, translated from the Biblical Greek into French.

How did you feel while I was reading? Probably somewhat uncomfortable, right? If I had continued in that language, moving from the Scripture to the sermon in something other than English, I think you might have considered taking action of some kind- stopping me, or quietly approaching me to ask me if I’m all right. You might even have considered that I was having a breakdown of some kind. Why? Because, that behavior would be strange, unfamiliar, foreign, even frightening. We don’t like to find ourselves dealing with unfamiliar or strange situations, do we?

When I was a girl I was TERRIFIED of situations that put me into an unfamiliar environment. I remember numerous times when my mother would ask me to drop something off for her, or run in and pick up a package for her, while she drove around the block of some very large building. (You wouldn’t think parking would be a big problem in my hometown of Lincoln, Nebraska, but in those days the downtown was busy.)

I would whine and cry and moan. I’d refuse to open the car door and get out. Drivers of cars behind us would honk in exasperation—my mom would sigh, put the car in gear, and circle the block one more time. We’d (literally!) go round and round multiple times.

Sometimes I would muster up my courage, jump out, and go into the building. I was so afraid of asking the wrong person the wrong question, of going to the wrong place—but generally it turned out just fine. But sometimes I refused to go in, and my mother would have to find a place to park and go inside herself, with me dragging along behind her.

I don't think any of us are comfortable with the unfamiliar, no matter what our age.

That's one of the reasons moving can be so hard. I'm aware of some folks in our congregation who are moving- Steve and Jean Cole are heading back to the east coast; Ron and Carol Hecht have found a new home. We are thrilled by some aspects of moving—but no matter what, it is still disorienting in various ways. EVERYTHING is unfamiliar—even the location of light switches and toilet paper holders in your own home. Walking through the house in the dark can lead to stubbed toes and violent encounters with walls where you expected a door!

PLACES can be unfamiliar—PEOPLE and their ways can be also.

I have had the privilege of mentoring several younger pastors as they move through the process towards ordination. One was a young Korean woman serving in Palatine nearly ten years ago.

She became discouraged at one point, confiding that people in her church often told her they found it hard to understand her accent. I suggested her parishioners in no way meant this as a personal rejection. They just weren't used to her speech yet—it was UNFAMILIAR to them. I suggested she encourage others to give it time.... As one whose spouse speaks in accented English, I know that in time, with increased familiarity, you can understand a “foreigner” perfectly—or almost!

Our grown children and their spouses have teased my husband sometimes, about his accent. They also have trouble reading his handwriting (Europeans do write differently than Americans.) Some years ago, one of our kids, puzzling over a message written on a birthday card said, “I'm pretty good at conversational ‘Gilles’—I speak ‘Gilles’ pretty well, but I still have trouble reading it.”

TWO THINGS ARE TRUE IN LIFE:

- 1) We aren't COMFORTABLE with UNFAMILIAR, different, foreign places, situations, languages or people.
- 2) We cannot AVOID UNFAMILIAR, different, foreign places, situations, languages or people. They are built into life.

What can we do about this? For Christians the answer is clear: Look to Jesus. The Bible contains many stories about Jesus interacting with outsiders, foreigners and people who are different. Today's Gospel is one example.

Jesus takes his followers into foreign territory where they immediately encounter a person. Both the place and the person are about the worst a God-fearing Jew could imagine.

The country is Gentile—emphasized by the presence of a herd of pigs- unclean animals for Jews.

The person is a Gentile, demon possessed man. He is UNCLEAR—not just dirty, the way WE think of unclean, but ritually unclean in a societal, and spiritual sense according to Jewish faith and law. Each detail is worse than the preceding one:

He's possessed by demons.

He's naked.

He lives like an animal.

He sleeps among the tombs- with bodies of the dead around him.

What is Jesus' response to this worst, most unclean person and place?

He shows kindness and compassion.

He brings cleansing and healing.

He banishes evil.

What is the response of the healed man?

He is changed, calmed, rational, clothed.

He is ready to belong, to rejoin community.

He is healthy at Christ's feet, ready to serve him.

What is the response of the people who witness Christ's healing?

They are terrified.

They ask Jesus to go away.

There's a great contemporary Christian song entitled "Please don't send me to Africa". The singer is addressing God, and makes all kinds of promises and does all kinds of bargaining—offering to teach Sunday School, even lead the Youth Group—if only God won't ask anything too, too hard--- like going to AFRICA!

If we are honest we'd have to admit we don't want God to ask us to go too far into unfamiliar territory—whether that's literal or figurative. It scares us too much! We don't think we'll like it- or be happy—or even be safe. Who are WE most like in

this Gospel story? We're most like the people who asked Jesus to leave—the people who were afraid.

Friends, I feel compelled to remind us all that being a Christian is not just going to church and forming friendships with the people we find there. Being a Christian means following Jesus. And he sometimes asks us to move beyond our comfort zones. He sometimes calls us to step onto “foreign shores”.

I actually find today's Scripture immensely comforting. Why? It teaches me two things:

1) Love and compassion have the power to transform unfamiliar, scary places, people, and situations, AND

2) Jesus goes first onto every foreign shore of my life.

Jesus was in the boat with his friends. When they reached the Gentile land, he stepped onto the shore FIRST. Jesus never sends us anywhere alone. He never says, “You first!” He doesn't circle the block, trying to coax me out the door into some strange building ALONE. He LEADS THE WAY. Wherever our feet carry us, Christ has gone over that ground before us.

With this story in mind, and the promise it gives us, that JESUS GOES FIRST----- Consider these questions:

- 1) Is there a “shore” in your life that Jesus is steering you towards that you want to avoid? Why is it hard to go there?
- 2) What might make it easier?
- 3) Are there “shores” Christ is leading our congregation towards?
- 4) How does Jesus want you to be a part of that?

Friends, it is normal to have some butterflies, concerns and anxieties in new and unfamiliar situations. But it's sometimes exciting---- an adventure! If God left us in familiar places all our lives, it would be pretty boring.

Jesus has already stepped onto every shore we come to in life. He is leading. Let's follow! Life, healing, wholeness triumph—these promises beckon! OFF WE GO! Into the wild, blue yonder. JESUS LEADS. We'll be OK.