

Sunday, January 28, 2018

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

I Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

Encouraging Others to Grow in Faith

Many of you like to plant a garden in the spring. Some of you might even be looking at seed catalogues and planning your flower and vegetables gardens. Maybe you've already started your tomato plants with the hope of transplanting them outside in May. Have you ever been discouraged with your garden? What this means is that after you till the soil, plant the seeds, water it, see the sprouts coming up and then plants appear. There might even be lettuce leaves and carrot tops so green against the darkness of the good earth. Then what happens? The next morning you go out to your garden and you find your neighbour's or even wild rabbits busily nibbling the green sprouts off the plants.

What do you do? You are discouraged and you are angry not only at the neighbour if indeed the rabbits are theirs, or you are angry at the wild rabbits chomping down on the green leaves. Do you chase them with a shovel, walk away and leave the plants to be eaten or left to die or do you take this discouraged moment and change yourself and your attitude?

For many people, this moment of discouragement after so much work, effort, time and expense might lead them to stop and give up. Some people might even wallow in discouragement and quit what they thought they enjoyed. But what do you do as a gardener? There are different options: You might run inside the house, grab a camera and take a photo of this scene where the rabbits are really enjoying the green leaves of spring. Or you might even check your fence line around the garden. Maybe there is a hole in the fence and the neighbours' rabbits found them and you mend it. Or you might look at the plants and continue to tend and water the garden as before with the hope that there wasn't too much damage or even loss of plants. Each day you watch for more rabbits and even a change in the plants themselves.

Sure enough, a few weeks later you will see results which might even amaze you. The plants are covered in green sprouts and there were more leaves than there were when the rabbits had eaten. From being discouraged with rabbit activity, a gardener can be encouraged just by fixing a fence or even taking in the moment of loss which may become a moment to enjoy.

Do you remember the last time you were discouraged? That is, something occurred that you had been working on and you had to change attitudes, activities or even had to stop

because you were not getting the results you wanted? We are often discouraged because of outside influences- or people but what does this mean in light of today's opportunities to try something new, to seek our new friendships and even to continue to learn more about yourself and your faith.

Our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy 18 reminds us that the people of this time and era were often discouraged about having faith in God. They needed to have morale boosters because God was such an important influence in their life yet his presence was not always felt or appreciated. God had offered them so many commandments and laws to follow and this often felt very discouraging. He told them that when they were going to enter the Promised Land there were to not learn or imitate the ways of the people who were there. These practises included child sacrifices, divination or sorcery, witchcraft or interpreting omens, casting spells or consulting the dead. God did not like the people who practised these acts and God was ready to drive them out. To inherit this land, God's people needed to be blameless before God.

To give them some encouragement, God told them that there would come a time when he would raise up a prophet among them and that this prophet would speak the words of God and his commandments. If anyone doesn't listen to the prophet's words, they will be called into account. For God's people hearing these words—it was a breath of new life and hope. God was sending a prophet to teaching them and encourage them to live God's ways. They would grow in faith through the words of God!

Today we are often discouraged when it comes to headlines and hopes; to advancements and adversaries, to leadership and opportunities and even what we should be saying and doing every day. As Christians we are facing situations never once thought of by our forebears, we are a minority in a secular world. And our secular culture has many small g gods which are so tempting. How are we to be encouraging others to grow in faith when we too are tempted to 'dabble in other ways of living?'

In our reading from Mark, Jesus is in the synagogue and has begun his teaching ministry. The people are listening attentively to him and are amazed at his words because he is teaching as one in authority and thorough knowledge of the words he spoke. Suddenly a man cries out to Jesus and asks, "What do you want with us?" Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are- the Holy One of God."

Jesus' response is in anger- as he sternly replies, " Be quiet and Come out of him. Jesus knew what was happening immediately. The man had an evil spirit within him and was testing

Jesus. The evil spirit questioned Jesus' motive in teaching and even named him as the Holy One of God. But what is interesting is that the people watching and hearing and listening to this only respond with questions of confusion. "What is this? A new teaching- and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." What did the people think was really happening?

Had you been sitting there and observing this scene wouldn't you have been in awe and wondering more than what the people decided was happening? A new teaching—interesting what else is Jesus going to do? Wouldn't it have been exciting and even encouraging to see that the prophet promised so long ago was now present?

A new teaching—just doesn't seem to describe what it was really about. At minimum this story of Jesus driving out an evil spirit moves us to stop assuming that "the way things are" must always equal "the way things have to be." God cannot be contained because God promises more, whether the "more" can be realized now or in a far-off future.

A new teaching? If this happened here many of you would sit in silence for a bit, talk amongst yourselves, began to pray or even be afraid and leave. But to state that Jesus' casing out of a demon as a new teaching is a big understatement for most of us because our ordinary experiences of teaching are or have been, plainly- dull. So much of our teaching and learning involves stuff that is on the periphery of our lives. We may need to know it, but it doesn't exactly hit the core of us, the things which most centrally define us as persons. It doesn't move us, change us, make us new persons. But Jesus' teaching- transforms us. Think about that demon-possessed man—and his new life as a forgiven follower and believer of Jesus. What about Saul/ Paul, Martin Luther, John Wesley and even today's modern prophets whose lives were and are continuing to be transformed. You could describe this as a new teaching but better yet describe it as God with us. For if God is with us, that changes everything.

As we continue to journey through this season of Epiphany when Jesus becomes visible and known to the world today we are searching for new teachings or at least an understanding of what Jesus can do for us in this moment. Not back in the Capernaum synagogue but now. We are still amazed by Jesus' authority, by his teachings and the potential of his actions recorded long which flips over our assumptions about what is possible through his presence in our lives. Sometimes as faithful Christians serving in this church we get discouraged when we see others get pulled into the destructive and devastating notions mentioned in Deuteronomy. But when we witness the Spirit of God in the lives of others and transformation occurs, we are encouraged in our faith and our desire to learn changes us and others! Those in our church

family who have been Christians for a long time need to be encouraged to carry on and those new to faith need to see that yes, there will be moments of discouragement, but because we share in ministry together, we can grow together and build each other up as we can- a little bit at a time.

At this time of year, we are so grateful to see the sun shine after so many dull and cloudy days. When we think of the bright star that shone brightly in the sky for the Wise Men to follow we need to be reminded that this light is Jesus. And in this season after Epiphany we are to look for Jesus and not just long for and acknowledging past manifestations of Jesus' greatness and the gospel's power. We are to discover and/or rediscover discover what deserves our amazement in our current and longed-for experiences.

The evil spirit names Jesus in front of the crowd who is listening. "I know who you are- the Holy One of God." The evil names the Christ out loud and in front of the synagogues people. Jesus told it to be quiet. He wasn't ready for everyone to believe him to be the Son of God. He had just begun his ministry he needed time. Again Jesus is revealed as God's son but the people are not too excited about this. There were no immediate tweets or blogs written, no newspaper extra was composed when the evil spirit called him by name. But Jesus takes authority in the moment and then news spreads quickly about the teacher.

How often are we looking for that moment when Jesus will break into our world of possessions to free us to live under his authority to exorcize the powers of this age? How often are we seeking to know Christ Jesus so that we are encouraged to try again to tell others His story? How often are we encouraging others to look to Jesus and learn about him? This is what it means to encourage others to grow in faith. Who knows when those seeds are planted and how they sprout, bloom and grow into full understanding of God's love? All we do know is that we need to do so with one another for together we are stronger in faith.