

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer

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Psalm 19; Mark 8: 27-38

No trip I have ever been on has turned out like I thought it would. Something always happens that I didn't expect. A detour. A cancelled flight home. Forgetting to bring something that's really needed and having to look for it in places that may or may not carry what was forgotten. An accident or an illness or a minor injury that rearranges the schedule of events for the day or the week. And so on. Traveling has elements of unpredictability, doesn't it? Every trip, every journey, no matter how well thought out in advance, contains surprises and twists that end up changing the journey itself. Including the spiritual journey. That's our focus for these next Sundays in September. Intentional Faith Development, Spiritual Formation. Each Sunday we will be looking at this theme through a different lens. Today's lens lets us see the bigger picture, so to speak. How are we formed as Christians? What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? What role does the church have in our spiritual formation?

To start I'll share these stories: A pastor in San Diego tells about Georgene Johnson, from Cleveland: "She was 42 years old. She was trying to have a good attitude about being 42 years old, so she started running and exercising to keep in shape. She said, 'I'm not going to look like I'm 42, or at least I am going to look like a good 42.'" She did well in her running. She was running farther every day. She thought she would try a little competition and entered a 10K race. That's about six miles. Nervous about her first race, she got up early, arrived at the start of the race, and to her surprise saw lots of people milling around, stretching, getting ready. All of a sudden a voice over the microphone said, 'Move to the starting line.' This was it. A gun sounded and they were off, like a huge wave, hundreds of runners, sweeping her up. She was in the race. After about 4 miles it occurred to her that they ought to be turning around and heading back to the finish line. She wondered why they didn't turn around. She stopped and asked an official. 'How come the course isn't turning around?' He said, 'Ma'am, you are running the Cleveland Marathon.' 26 miles. Her event, the 10K, was to start a half-hour after the start of the marathon." Some of us would have stopped right there and said, that's it, I'm going home. But to her credit, she kept right on going, and finished the race. She said this, "This is not the race I trained for. This is not the race I entered. But for better or worse, this is the race that I am in."

And the next story comes from the Rev. Billy Graham, who told it often -- it's about a time early in his ministry when he arrived at a small town to preach a sermon. Wanting to mail a letter, he asked a young boy where the post office was. After the boy told him, Rev. Graham thanked him and said, "If you'll come to the Baptist church this evening, you can hear me telling everyone how to get to heaven." "I don't think I'll be there," the boy said. "You don't even know your way to the post office."

For better or worse running the race we're in. Knowing where we're going. In some ways, those are fitting descriptions of our journey of Christian faith. And that's what we're spending some time looking at today. We've already started – with our celebration of Sunday School teachers and learners and our Bible presentation to Lily Lenington. We'll continue after the service, as well, with a reception, and with a table of information about how you can take part in ministries of learning and spiritual growth here at Redeemer. This is going to be a fun month, I am sure. Make sure you bring somebody with you next Sunday!

Trips. Vacations. Traveling. For me that means maps. I don't have a GPS in my car, so I still rely on visual maps and printed directions to get where I'm going. And when I'm getting to some place here in Cleveland or nearby, I usually go to MapQuest. I'll look at the section of the map that shows up on my computer screen -- and then read the driving directions, and if I need to I'll print them out. The map that I get shows where I'm starting from and where I'm ending, but it's pretty compact. I can if I want enlarge sections of it, one at a time, to see the trip in stages. I usually don't bother with this, and on most occasions I don't print out that little map, either. For places around here, the driving directions are good enough. But for longer trips, I still like to go to AAA and get my road maps. And I like to open up those perfectly folded maps, and lay them out on my table and plan my trip. I'll get a map for every state I know I'm going to be traveling in. I'll then look at them and decide how I'm going to get from here to there. For example, taking Grace to Beloit, Wisconsin last month meant that for the first time in my life (really) I was going to have to drive through or around Chicago by myself. I had some questions about this in my mind, and some concerns. So I looked over that Illinois/Chicago map thoroughly – and with some advice from persons who travel that way frequently, planned a way that would not be so anxiety producing on a Friday afternoon in Chicago at rush hour. The plan worked, and the trip went just fine. When I left home, I could see in my mind the whole trip – from the turnpike in Ohio and Indiana, to the various toll roads around Chicago, – and then finally up north on 39 in Illinois to Wisconsin. I came home a different way -- from Wisconsin to Illinois to Indiana for just a little bit, then into Michigan and then finally home through Ann Arbor and Toledo and then back on 80/90 east again. I like how the AAA state maps give you just enough of the adjacent states so it's easy to plan a trip that goes from one state to another. I also have a U.S. and World travel atlas – and usually I look at that before going to get my road maps. Could I have map-quested or yahoo travel Googled my trip from University Heights, OH to Beloit, Wisconsin? Of course. And I would have received detailed driving directions, I know. But for me, there's something helpful about seeing the whole trip laid out all at once. I like seeing where I am in relation to other cities and places in the state. What else is around me? By looking at the Illinois/Indiana maps, for example, I could see the roads that would take me along the southern and eastern sides of Lake Michigan, to get me to Lynn and Tom's cottage on the lake. After I got to their cottage, and looked at a Michigan map, I discovered that I was going to be only 1 ½ hours away from my daughter-in-law Abi's parents, my friends Eliz and Mark, who live outside Grand Rapids. Until I looked at the map, and could see the whole state, I would not have thought about changing my trip home and going to see them too. A

MapQuest map would have given me a good bird's eye view only of the trip I had originally designed. My AAA road maps helped me get the whole picture, and contributed to changing the trip's itinerary.

And what does that have to do with anything, Pastor Karen you might be asking yourselves? Well this – that I think coming to church only for worship on Sunday mornings is sort of like getting a snapshot view of the Christian life, like a MapQuest illustration of your road trip, and that coming to church for both worship and some kind of Christian education and spiritual formation is more like getting the bigger picture. The Bible is a road map that changes the course of your life.

“Who do people say that I am?” Jesus asks his disciples on their way to the villages of Caesarea and Philippi. And then, more directly, “But who do you say that I am?” We can get snapshots of who Jesus is through sermons and morning worship. But we can get a fuller picture of who Jesus is through reading and studying and discussing the Bible. It's the difference between Jesus asking us who others say he is, and who we say he is. It's the difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus. It's the difference between being an occasional fan and being a lifelong follower.

Now that fuller picture still isn't one that we can frame and hang on our wall and just look at from time to time, however. No single description or definition of Jesus is sufficient. When the disciples say that others say Jesus is John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets – there was indeed some truth to those answers. Jesus was like them – he stirred things up, he called people to repentance, he spoke of the coming of God's kingdom. He challenged the authorities. But those answers didn't say it all. And, really, neither did Peter's own answer, “You are the Messiah.” Because what does it mean to say Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is the Christ? That's not an exact answer, either, is it? Because how Peter understands Jesus as the Christ and how Jesus himself defined it aren't the same. Jesus talks about suffering and rejection and death and resurrection. This isn't Peter's way of thinking about the Messiah. So just to say Jesus is the Messiah doesn't necessarily mean we have the answer that is the be all and end all of all other answers.

All this is to say that our purpose as a church, and our need as Christians, is not simply to provide for faith birth, but to provide for faith development. It's not enough, for example, to get saved, or join the church, or profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior -- it's about ongoing growth. It's about being formed as Christians – shaped, molded, stretched, reworked, tested, challenged -- and all this over and over again.

The spiritual life is not just about the destination. It's about the journey. Where we stop along the way. What sights we take in. The detours. The breakdowns. The changes in weather and landscape and road conditions. Sometimes the road is smooth. Sometimes it's dangerous. Sometimes it even seems dull. And of course it's about our traveling companions. We are people of the way, who are on the way, and who are called to show the way to others.

Peter really thought he knew enough. “You are the Messiah. You are the Christ.” And he was content with his own knowledge, his own opinions. But right away Jesus challenged him. And when Peter resisted, Jesus pushed him some more. “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

And that’s always the rub, isn’t it? Our minds get set on human things, and when they get set they’re hard to move. Why else do we keep arguing and debating the same things in the church over and over again? Because our minds are set -- because going to new and hard places makes us uncomfortable. Because admitting our own stubbornness and our own misguidedness makes us even more uncomfortable. Who likes to admit they’re lost? Who likes asking for directions? Some of us may be more willing to finally admit we need directions than others, but all of us, I would say, stay lost longer than we need to. We all try to figure it out on our own first.

Are you being pushed in your thinking about God – about Jesus – about the Bible -- about the church -- about how you connect your faith with your life? I hope so. If not, you’re missing out. And your journey isn’t as full and exciting and adventurous as it could be. Going back to that traveling metaphor -- imagine you’re on a road trip and you’ve stopped at a nice rest stop for a break along one of your favorite highways in one of your favorite states. The rest stop is clean. You can sit on one of the picnic tables and get a pretty view. But if you just stay there, you won’t finish your trip. And eventually you’ll get hungry for more than what you can get in those vending machines. Eventually you’ll want to see more than those same trees or those same mountains. Eventually you’ll want to get moving again.

So it is with our spiritual lives. Staying put a while in one place is okay, but we’re missing out on a lot if we don’t move on. To some new ways of thinking. To some new ways of being together as a community. To a deeper relationship with God and with each other. To a fuller picture of who Jesus is and what it means for him to be the Christ, the Messiah.

I want now to share a bit from several books that I recommend to any and all of you that are interested in learning more about Jesus or more about the Bible.

Professor Amy-Jill Levine, a practicing Jew who teaches New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School wrote a clear, insightful book in 2006 titled, [The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus](#). She ends her introduction with this explanation: “After two thousand years of ignorance, the time has come for church and synagogue, Jews and Christians, to understand our intertwined histories, to see Jesus as a Jew who made sense to other Jews in a Jewish context, to learn how our two traditions came to a parting of the ways, to recognize how misunderstandings of Jesus and Judaism continue even today to foster negative stereotypes and feed hate, and to explore how the gains in interfaith relations made over the past several decades can be nurtured and expanded”. (Amy-Jill Levine, [The Misunderstood Jew](#), HarperSanFrancisco, 2006, p. 16). Have you ever wondered about this? Have you ever heard simplistic comparisons made between Jews and Christians, and thought they

were inadequate but didn't really know enough to say more? Or have you held onto things you learned long ago about the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, and become set in your own ways of thinking? Are you willing to move on from that rest stop?

Marcus Borg writes about the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus in his very readable book, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time. The pre-Easter Jesus is Jesus as a figure of history before his death. The post-Easter Jesus is the Jesus of Christian tradition and experience. For those of you who don't quite know how to reconcile the New Testament accounts and language of Jesus' resurrection with modern and post-modern scientific thought, this may indeed be a helpful book for you. It may help you in your own thinking about who Jesus is to you. (Marcus Borg, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

I've prepared a hand-out on Bible reading and interpretation for you. It comes from our United Methodist General Board of Discipleship. Today we gave a Bible to a fourth grader. We have Bibles in our pews. We hear it read every Sunday. But is that enough? Simply put, no. To be people of the word means to be people shaped and informed by Scripture, and to be people familiar enough with Scripture to be aware of how it shapes and informs us. The Bibles are not here in our pews for decoration. We do not give them to our children just because. We do not offer Sunday School and Bible study groups just because we're a church and that's what we're supposed to do. We offer them because they are avenues for growth. We offer them because they shape and form us as people of faith.

Maybe you can relate to what this writer describes in her essay, "With Sighs Too Deep for Words: On Being Bad at Reading the Bible: "You can sit down, open the Bible at Genesis chapter one, or Matthew chapter one, or anywhere you like, and start to read. Or you can scan it like a magazine. People do this! I have done it. But the thing is so immense, so complex, so infuriating, that it forces you back on yourself. If you're in the wrong frame of mind—restless, demanding, looking for a quick fix -- the book will fight you. It will push hideous violence in your face, or stun you with boredom, or go stiff with familiarity -- then just as you're about to give up and put in a load of washing, it will casually tell you, in Exodus, that the God of Israel, when Moses saw him, was standing on 'what looked like a sapphire pavement.' Or, in Judges, that when Eglun, the greedy king of Moab was stabbed, 'the fat closed upon the blade.'" Or, in Bel and the Dragon, of the Apocrypha, that the angel of the Lord took the prophet Habbakuk 'by the crown' (still holding the dinner he had just cooked in Judea) "and bare him by the hair of his head, and through the vehemency of his spirit set him in Babylon," right over the lion's den where Daniel had been flung and was lying hungry. Or, in Tobit, that 'the boy left with the angel and the dog followed behind.'" Or, in John, that Christ came into this world so that people 'might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.'" "Abundance!" she writes. "And an answer to what Kafka calls 'a longing for something greater than all that is fearful.'" (The Best American Spiritual Writing, 2005, edited by Philip Zaleski, Houghton Mifflin, 2005; essay by Helen Garner, "Sighs Too Deep for Words: On Being Bad at Reading the Bible", pp. 65-73).

Do you have that longing?

I have been preaching the Scriptures for 25 years. I have been reading the Bible for a good part of my life. I still get surprised by it. I still shake my head at it, too. I'm still learning. I'm still being shaped by its words, and the by the thoughts and ideas of others who are being shaped by its words. My spiritual journey has had stretches of clarity, and stretches of uncertainty. At times I have felt lost. At times I have wondered what it's all worth. But so far, for better and worse, I'm still traveling. And, like it is when I get out my road maps, I know where I'm going. I also know I'm not traveling alone. I've had and continue to have plenty of companions on the way. Family members. Congregations. Colleagues. Teachers and counselors. Preachers. Theologians and Bible scholars. Poets. Composers. Artists. Those who have listened to me, and those I have listened to. And of course Jesus. I don't always understand who Jesus is – to others, or to me. Rabbi. Friend. Brother. Healer. Emmanuel. Prophet. Light of the World. Lover of my Soul. Redeemer. Peacemaker. Good news. Messiah. He has been all these to me -- at different times in my life, or even all at the same time. I do know I'm still interested in Jesus. I do know I have decided to follow him.

“Find Your Path. Share the Journey.” We have these posters, and we have these postcards. It's one way we tell others about who we are and what we do. Here's what they say: “I'm looking for a church where not everyone looks like me. I value diversity.” “I'm looking for a place that is both progressive and traditional.” “I'd like to find a church that is small enough to know everyone, yet large enough to make a difference.” “Give me a church where love rules and Jesus is Lord!” “I'd like to find a place where living with the questions is valued as much as having the answers.” As we hang up these posters around town, and as we send out these postcards to new residents and prospective members, let us remember that what we offer to others is also offered to ourselves. That we too need direction in our lives, we too need to be formed and re-formed in our thinking and in our actions, and that in this place, and through our church's ministries, we can find our path, and we can share the journey.