

**October 15, 2023 Message for Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church**  
**Staying the Course: Betsy Gonwa**

**Bible Wisdom Teachings**

Exodus 32:1-14

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

**I. When We Don't Know the Way**

A. The Israelites are on the path to something new and wonderful! They are freed from being slaves in Egypt. They have just experienced the power of God being made manifest in many ways.

1. There is so much evidence of God's hand at work.
  - a) Moses being saved as a baby and raised up to be a leader, being called by God and responding to the call in spite of his doubts about himself
  - b) The plagues and Pharaoh allowing the Israelites to leave
  - c) The opening of the Red Sea
  - d) God providing manna for food
2. Couldn't they trust for just a little longer? Obviously not.
3. But why not?
4. Because their faith is not mature enough. Their faith is still in its infancy.
5. They are dependent upon Moses' faith, upon Moses' relationship with God. And Moses is up on the mountain. They are on their own and their faith is faltering.
6. I feel for them. They are in a new place. They have walked into the unknown and things look different. Things feel different.
7. There have been ups and downs. It isn't as if they have been trusting God all along. In fact, they have been whining and complaining even before they reach this low point and revert to idol worship.
8. Is it because Moses was taking too long on the mountain? That is possible. However, I imagine it didn't take much to send them spiraling down the path that took them away from God.

B. When we are in uncertainty, waiting for what is next to come into being, we tend to long for the familiar, for what is old and comfortable. That's why moving into newness is sometimes called "breaking out of our comfort zone." And when out of our comfort zones, we are vulnerable. Like the Israelites, we may flounder and fall.

C. I have a friend right now who just left her job without a new job in hand. She has not done this before. It is a time of uncertainty and doubt. She left the job for the sake of her own health and wellbeing. She has waffled back and forth over this decision for months. She knows it is the right decision for her, and yet she is struggling to be at peace in her newness and freedom. She

wants to trust that her decision was sound, but part of her continues to doubt. Part of her longs for security. Part of her wants to return to being who she was before. She is struggling to feel at home in her new surroundings and in her new way of being. The old has passed away and with it her identity. She is becoming a new creation. This is what can happen if we stay the course.

## **II. How to Stay the Course: What can we do in these times of uncertainty and doubt?**

A. In St. Ignatius' rules for his spiritual exercises,

1. He gives specific guidelines for what to do and what not to do in times of consolation and desolation. For Ignatius, desolation is when we feel far from God. Alone. Abandoned. Like the Israelites feel in today's reading. Consolation, of course is when we feel close to God.
2. You can probably guess what Ignatius advises us to do in times of desolation:
  - a) Trust.
  - b) Be patient.
  - c) Remember that God's grace is sufficient.
  - d) Do not make changes.

B. But how do we do trust? How can we be patient? How can we remember that God's grace is sufficient? How long can we wait? Without doing something? Anything! To get away from feeling alone. Uncomfortable. Powerless.

C. Ignatius' advice is to counter desolation

1. He gives examples of how we can counter desolation
  - a) increase prayer
  - b) meditate on scripture
  - c) do acts of penance
  - d) do works of charity
2. A spiritual director explained this to me in a way that helped me understand it in a way that is meaningful for me. She said that
  - a) prayer engages affectivity (our feelings)
  - b) meditating on scripture engages our thinking
  - c) acts of penance and works of charity engage our behavior
3. I have come up with my own ways to engage my feelings, my thinking and my behavior. Some ways that I have discovered are to:
  - a) walk in nature
  - b) practice yoga
  - c) journal
  - d) read and discuss spiritual books
  - e) process my feelings with empathy buddies
4. Each of us must develop our own practices to help us stay the course.

#### **IV. Guidance from Scripture**

- A. Paul provides some examples of engaging the body, mind and the spirit in Philippians
  1. In verse 6, he writes, “In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God.” This aligns with what Ignatius says about increasing prayer.
  2. And in verse 8, Paul writes, “whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” It matters where we focus our minds. This is similar to Ignatius’ advice to meditate on scripture.
  3. He even devotes a sentence to our behavior. Verse 5 states, “Your kindness should be known to all.” Being kind is something we can do to engage our behavior.
  
- B. We can also learn from the parable of the Wedding Feast.
  1. The Reverend Michael Marsh, an Episcopal priest, in his blog “Interrupting the silence” claims that the importance of presence is the message of this parable. I will share some of his reflections with you.  
<https://interruptingthesilence.com/2014/10/12/an-open-invitation-a-sermon-on-matthew-221-14/>
  2. “There’s only one thing that distinguishes the first-invited guests from the second-invited guests. Presence. The second-invited guests showed up. The first-invited guests did not. The ‘wedding hall was filled’ with the second-invited guests but the first-invited guests ‘would not come.’ That’s the only difference between the two groups.
  3. “The key to our life in God is to just show up, to be present. That’s a lot easier said than done. To be present is difficult work.”
  4. As for the person who showed up without a wedding robe, the Reverend Marsh claims, “This is about more than just a dress code violation. Something else was missing. ‘He was speechless.’ It was as if he wasn’t really there. Jesus is reminding us that there are times when we show up but we’re not really present. Our body is there but we’ve left the room.”

#### **VI. Staying in Integrity in the Ebb and Flow of Life**

- A. There are many ways to engage our bodies. Our purpose is to stay in integrity while we are waiting for consolation to return. We cannot make ourselves feel close to God. It is not in our control. It is only by grace. Desolation and consolation are part of the ebb and flow of life. For we are human, and we feel. And as we journey through life, our feelings will ebb and flow, too.
  
- B. According to Ignatius:
  1. Desolation means leaving integrity behind. It is movement that decreases our faith, hope and love.

2. Consolation means coming to wholeness. It is movement that increases faith hope and love.
  3. In one, we are moving away from God and in the other we are moving toward God.
- C. What will we do?
1. Will we follow Ignatius' advice to engage our bodies, our minds and our spirits – including our feelings – when we are in our times of uncertainty and doubt, or even of desolation?
  2. Or, like the Israelites, will we revert to old and familiar ways?
  3. There is no way to know in advance what we will do. What we can do is to be aware. What we can do is to be willing to be uncomfortable with our lack of forward movement. What we can do is to be still and wait for God. All of this is how our faith moves on from infancy to adolescent and adult faith.

## **VII. What if the Israelites had stayed the course?**

- A. What they could have done
1. What if they had prayed?
  2. Or reflected on all that God had done for them up to that point?
  3. What if they had performed acts of kindness for each other?
  4. We cannot know what the outcome may have been because that is not what they did.
- B. What they actually did
1. They waited for Moses to come down from the mountain, which was probably longer than they expected.
  2. They allowed themselves to be depleted with no more capacity for trust, with no patience, with no faith in God
  3. They worshipped a golden calf.
  4. They did not stay the course.
- C. We can imagine that a different outcome may have been possible for them, and in so doing we can imagine different outcomes for ourselves, too.

## **Reflection Questions**

What are some spiritual practices that help you stay the course?

Do your spiritual practices engage your feelings? your thinking? your behavior?

What people in your life are you fully present for?

Which Bible character did you most identify with from today's readings?