

We Keep Learning
Mark 7:24-37
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
September 9, 2018
Rev. Glen Bell

Joe Dittmar was a long way from home seventeen years ago. He was on the 105th floor of the south tower of the World Trade Center.

Before his business meeting began, he saw the aftermath of the first plane hitting the north tower. The flames were red, he said, “redder than any red I’d ever seen before in my life.”

He took the stairs all the way down. All he could think about was making his way back home to Illinois to see his wife and four children.ⁱ

He’d taken the train to Manhattan that morning from Philadelphia. So he headed to the station. “I got to Penn Station,” he said. “It’s 80 minutes from New York to Philly. The train was packed with people. . . . And not a word was spoken. There weren’t any words to say.

“When the train got to 30th Street Station, I got out and searched for my rental car. It’s fourteen hours to drive from Philadelphia to Illinois. I got home in eleven and a half hours. I just wanted to get home.

“I called the office to let them know I wasn’t gonna be in and it was a good thing because they thought I was dead.

“I was about fifteen minutes away and I called my wife for what was probably like the 50th time and I said to her, ‘Hey, I’m almost there.’ She said, ‘They decided to have a mass at Our Lady of Mercy ---.’ And I stopped her right in the middle of her sentence. I said, ‘I’ll be there. I’ll meet you there.’

“I tried to pull into the church parking lot. Now, you would’ve thought it was Christmas. I mean, it was just packed. And I opened up the back door of that church to see these hundreds of eyes all staring back at me, knowing where I had been. I looked over to the right to the pew where we always sit, and I see my kids, some of my friends. And my wife jumps over the back of the pew, runs to the back of the church, gives me the greatest hug and a kiss a man could ever want. She’s not that kind of demonstrative person, but that’s what made that moment even more incredible. And I knew at that moment I was home.”ⁱⁱ

Joe Dittmar learned a lot on that terrible day. He learned the importance of home. Home was with his wife and children, with those gathered to cry and pray and remember and hope. He learned that God is our refuge, a great help in trouble. He learned that we need not fear, even though the buildings fall and the mountains shake and the waters roar and the mountains tremble.ⁱⁱⁱ

On those stairs, in that train, he learned that we are all the same beneath the skin - black, white and brown; young and old; wealthy and not; privileged and not. I suspect he was together, with others – hundreds of strangers – in a way he may have never been before. I expect he saw that we all try to endure. We all try to hope. We all try to find the words.

On his journey, as he arrived at his church, in the embrace of his wife, his eyes were opened. He discovered the presence of faith, of hope, of love. Through the terror and the determination, through despair and renewal, I suspect he discovered there is more to learn about life.

You and I have choices every day. Do we do it all just exactly the same ways we always have – raising the children, praying to God, remembering what’s important, living our lives? Or are we willing to open our hearts, to break our routine, to learn something new – perhaps even from someone very different from ourselves?

Jesus is in a pickle. This story from Mark is really different. We expect Jesus, as always, to have the right word at the right time. But here, in this story, *Jesus is the one who is taught, the one who learns*. And today through this story, he invites us to learn from strangers, outsiders – as one New Testament scholar puts it, “from the mother of a worthless, Gentile girl whose mind was devoured by a demon, from a good for nothing deaf man who couldn’t even speak clearly.”^{iv}

Jesus is in a pickle in this story. And today we are too. We are defined by the concrete of our political perspectives, hard, fast, nasty. I had breakfast with a pastor friend last week. He told me of the church couple divorcing because of their political disagreements.

We are defined by the straitjacket of our past, our habits, our routine. Too often we talk about God and our relationship with Jesus as if it’s a long ago done deal. We have spiritually signed on the dotted line. We have made the commitment. We or our parents took the plunge into baptism. We became members of the church. But here is the question. What have we learned new about Jesus, about God’s will and ways, this week? this month? this year?

Our language does not help us at all here. “I became a Christian when I was a young man,” we say. “I joined the church in 1992.” Or “I made a decision for Jesus just after I turned twenty-eight.”

There is a lot more to it than that. Even though you and I often act like we know enough, God invites us to learn more each day, to become more faithful and effective as we follow Jesus. In the words of the Shorter Catechism, we are saved not only by the act of God’s grace through faith, but by the ongoing work of God within us, as we more and more turn from evil and more and more embrace goodness and generosity and sharing and forgiving.

I learned something important when I visited Israel and Palestine several years ago through Columbia Seminary. At stop after stop, in Galilee and in Jerusalem, many of those in the many crowds around us seemed to be tourists, checking boxes off their tourist list. Mount of Transfiguration? Check. The town of Capernaum? Check. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre? Check.

But others were lost and found in prayer. They were reflecting and meditating on their experience. They were not tourists. They were pilgrims, with something to learn, something new to discover, seeking new ways to grow in grace and faith. They were on a journey with Jesus, beginning back in the past, but growing right now.

What will it be like as we learn to live our spiritual lives more and more this way – always yearning for growth? always eager for more truth, more mercy, more good news, more opportunities for discipleship? always leaning forward into what God is doing next?

This is the example of Jesus. The persistence of the Gentile mother, this stranger, this outsider, persuades Jesus to open his heart and faith. He becomes convinced that the bounds of God’s love are broader than he first thought.

This is the way of Christ – to look with open eyes, to listen with open ears, to expect to learn something new.

The faith leaders who have had the most impact on me have been the ones with more to learn – no matter how many years they have lead the Bible study, no matter how long they have been a person of faith.

I so fondly remember Al and Margaret Wells. Al grew up in Pensacola, and together he and Margaret served churches in Florida, North Carolina and Georgia, and at Stillman College. They were lively and lovely and gracious. I was a young pastor, just out of seminary. They were a newly retired pastor and wife. They always seemed eager for the next adventure - learning new hymns, making new friends, encouraging young pastors, heading out to Jamaica to serve as mission workers right at the age when most of us might be slowing down.

Today you and I welcome over a dozen new members to our congregation. What will they teach us in the days and weeks ahead? How will we grow from the new energy and ideas they offer?

We are installing two deacons, Bette Lou Cookson and Jennifer Hall. What will we learn from them and their gifted witness of commitment and care?

John Robinson was the pastor of the Puritan pilgrims just before they departed for the New World on the *Mayflower*. For years he had been a dedicated pastor, first in England and then in the Netherlands, teaching and guiding this band of Christians who were determined to worship God faithfully and wholeheartedly.

Just before the group departed, John Robinson spoke to them one final time. “I charge you before God . . . that if God reveals anything to you . . . be ready to receive it. For I am persuaded that the Lord has more truth and light to break forth from God’s holy Word.”

That’s it. Each day, what will we learn?

How will we learn and relearn the importance of our home in God? How will we discover that we are all the same beneath the skin? How will we learn the power of faith and hope and love?

How will we grow as we follow Jesus? What new truth and light will break forth from God’s Word?

ⁱ National Public Radio, September 7, 2018, Aisha Turner and Emma Bowman

ⁱⁱ storycorps.org, September 7, 2018

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 46:1-3

^{iv} Mitzi Maynor, *The Spirituality of Mark* (Louisville: WJK Press, 1996), p. 51