

“A Story and a Meal for the Uphill Way”

I Peter 3:13-17; Matthew 14:13-21

1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Introduction

I walk on the trails at Linden Point. Sometimes I walk about 7AM. Other days I walk around 5PM. It's about 2.2 miles around using the long way. I press myself and walk along at about 4mph. It takes 33-34 minutes. And what I especially like are the hills. Well, maybe “like” is not exactly the right word. The flat trails are fine, and the downhills are easier. But it's the up hills that are the test. And I know it's the up hills that really get me in better shape.

Christianity began as an “uphill religion.” In the Roman-Greco world, confessing and following Jesus Christ made you different than the vast majority of people. And most people don't like “different.” So persecutions broke out. The first were local persecutions and harassment of Christians. And then the Roman government directed persecutions and arrests, often “scapegoating” Christians for problems in the Empire. To a greater or lesser degree, the saying “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church” was true. Despite the persecutions the church grew. But it was steep up hill. Christians were often tested.

Then in the 4th C it all changed. Emperor Constantine made Christianity the state religion. Now it was good to be a Christian. And “Christendom” was born; the working together of church and state. And so it would be in the western world for the next 1700 years. It was a lot of flat trails and downhills. If you wonder what that looked like, think “1950s” in this country.

But things began to change. Religious institutions were questioned. Secularism grew. People began to doubt the importance of religion in their lives. Young adults left the church and did not come back. It became popular to say “I'm spiritual, but not religious,” which meant “I have some vague beliefs about God, and am a morally good person.” But without the support of a religious community even that is now unraveling. And so the trail has more up hills today. Christianity is a challenge once again, different than the mainstream culture. But you already know that as you believe in Jesus and seek to follow his way.

And this is one of reasons I chose for a summer sermon series I Peter. Sure, it's been 10-12 years since I last preached from I Peter, so it's good to hear it again. But we're also in I Peter because Christian faith was an “uphill trail” for the Christians in I Peter. Persecution and harassment were real. And I thought it might be interesting to listen for God's word in I Peter to us as we also walk up more uphills for our faith today.

II. Text and Brief Exegesis

The reading from I Peter directly addresses suffering and persecution. Listen carefully for what you hear.

Read I Peter 3:13-17.

Bad things do happen to good people doing good things. And these “bad things” the text is talking about is harassment due to your Christian faith. It’s people spreading lies about you. It’s being the subject of gossip. It’s the loss of jobs. It’s being threatened... or worse. It’s vandalism and prejudice. And so what do you do? Interestingly the text says “make a respectful defense.” It means “tell your story. Be prepared to tell your story.”

“So Glenn, how did you become a pastor? When you left here for college we all thought you’d become an engineer. We thought you’d be a chemical engineer, or an electrical engineer, or a civil engineer. How did you become a pastor?” The question came from my best high school friend, Ray. It was more than 25 years ago. I was back in Northport, Washington, where I went to high school, visiting my parents. One evening I went into town to visit Ray. “How did you become a pastor?” he asked.

Hmmm? It was the first time anyone directly asked me that. I knew it really wasn’t a question about education and degrees. Rather it was a question about a life journey. So I shared a little bit about going to the Presbyterian Church as a kid. And I shared about my college classes in theology and the Bible. And I shared about working with kids in youth ministry. And I shared a little about going on mission trips and going to seminary.

But truthfully, I did a poor job answering the question about “How I became a pastor.” I didn’t share anything about my mysterious experiences with God as a kid. I didn’t share anything about the circumstances that happened at just the right time and the people who gently directed me in just the right way. I didn’t share anything about my spiritual life and the joy I find in being a pastor. I did a poor job with my story. And so I decided I needed to be better. And I decided I needed to be prepared. So I worked on it. And, of course, the story gets added on to as I live this calling as a pastor.

“Be prepared to tell your story.” I think I Peter is right. In a non-Christian, secular culture people will wonder; why do you go to church? Why do you believe in God? Why do you follow the way of Jesus? Why don’t you gossip? Why do you act kindly, and forgive others, and share generously? All those things, and more, are counter-cultural, and people will wonder why. Some friends will even ask, like my friend Ray, “What’s your story?” What would you say? I think it’s important to think about that and be prepared.

And I think that’s increasingly important as the institutional church diminishes in size and influence. My story will matter less and people will dismiss me as part of “old time religion.” And pastors will be fewer and matter less in the church of the not too distant future. But who will matter more is you. Elders, deacons, and church members will become even more important leaders in the church. And your faith, and your way of life, and your story will shape the way of that leadership in the church. It’s already happening in many smaller churches as they

can afford less and less pastoral leadership. It's up hill now. Your story matters now and will matter more tomorrow. What's your story?

The other thing I think about on this uphill trail is the nature of church life. How are we together? It's important. Without the culture supporting and encouraging anything in the church, the way of church life matters. That's why the text from last week in I Peter said, "Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (I Ptr. 3:8). That is to be the way of their life together as a church.

When the community around you questions your belief in God and your way of life following Jesus; when there is opposition and harassment; when there is frustration and fear; when these things and more happen; you need a community that has your back. You need relationships that encourage you and give you hope. You need people who lift you up in prayer when you can't pray yourself. You need people who believe when you find it hard to believe yourself. We all need to be part of Christian community that's bigger than what we think and feel and believe ourselves. We need people who walk with us up the hill. And the very center of that life together is found at the communion table. It's the invitation of Christ to come as we are and share bread and a cup with each other and him.

Our story in Matthew we know as the feeding of the 5,000. We know it as a miracle story. And it is. But there is also a connection to communion. And the gift of communion comes from a Savior who knows what it is to walk up hill for a people who will know what it is to walk up hill themselves.

Interestingly the context for the story is the death of John the Baptist. John was Jesus' cousin. John baptized Jesus. And John and Jesus respected each other's ministries and calls from God. And I suspect their lives and friendship were closer than that. So when John is arrested and killed by a simple order of King Herod, Jesus is shaken. I think Jesus is reminded of the uphill way that he walks and the dangers and the cost. And I think this is why Jesus departs to a deserted place to pray. He needs time to rest in God with this.

Following that Jesus is immediately surrounded by the needs of people. So there is healing and teaching and caring. It's walking with people up hill. And so the day goes by. Evening is upon them. People are hungry. They are hungry for food. They have been hungry for love, hope, and God. And so they share what they have. It's only 5 small loaves and 2 fish. But in the hands of Jesus it is enough. And in the process of the story we hear the words, "blessed, broke, gave." We will hear "blessed, broke, gave" at the Last Supper. These are words of communion. It's a signal that more than food is happening. And so a weary people and a weary Jesus share a meal, share communion, together. It's a meal that matters even more when the way is steep.

III. Brief Theological Reflection

A story, your story, and a meal, communion; both are important for people who travel the way of Jesus. Especially when the way is up hill. It is increasingly uphill today.

In pondering this sermon I was reminded of a commercial that was part of a sermon more than 10 years ago. It's a great commercial. It's a good message. In fact, the commercial is a sermon itself. And I think it fits this sermon. **Super ads, Eating Together.**

Isolation and alone. Or different people, different races, different foods together. The choice matters. It's a meal together around a table and the sharing of stories. And did you notice the last man to the table brings bread and wine. Perhaps a subtle suggestion of communion. It's the way of the church. And it's the way of our summer communion service today.