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Worship and Discipleship by Margo Geesing
“Challenges”

During the month of August, we got through the whole of John chapter 6 with the discourse on the Bread of Life. We got that, right? Jesus is the Bread of Life. You need to receive him to have [eternal] life within you. We, as people of faith, receive Jesus in Holy Communion.

We are back in the Gospel of Mark for September! Mark is the “GO” Gospel. Jesus is on the go; his followers are on the go. Most of the Gospel lessons begin with where he is going or where he came from. And he gives out challenges constantly. Challenges we are encouraged to fulfill, also.

First Sunday of September Jesus has landed the boat in Gennesaret and is met by the Pharisees who had come from Jerusalem, basically to confront him. His followers were not following all the prescribed “rules” for the faith: this time it was regarding ritual cleaning, but it could have been anything. Jesus reminds them that there is a difference between doing the “right” things without a connection to the why it’s done and doing something with regard for the heart of the matter. Jesus is more concerned with the reasoning behind actions rather than the perfectness of the action. Just following the rules is not living your faith. Living faith, what Jesus calls us all to do, involves not just your outward actions but your inward heart. Spirit versus Letter of the Law. *This could make us reflect on how we judge the faith of others by what we see them do in relation to how we think faith “should be” lived rather than accepting that faith comes in many forms and expressions.*

The second Sunday in September Jesus has an encounter with a woman who was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. Especially in the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus interacts with women they tend to challenge him. He allows them to make him think differently. In a culture that did not give women much power, Jesus allows them to have power to change his thinking. In this case, he goes from addressing only the Israelites to beginning to include some of the Gentiles in his mission. Something similar happens when he encounters the Samaritan woman at the well. *How do you deal with encounters with people who think differently than you do? Do you dismiss them or do you listen to them and evaluate your way of thinking? You may not need to change your way of thinking but perhaps at some points, you might.* This Gospel lesson also has a second part. Jesus does a, “Shhh, don’t say anything.” Which is gleefully ignored. This happens to Jesus on numerous occasions, including when with his own disciples. You would think he would learn that the fastest way to get something spread around is to tell the person to say nothing. *Think about your own encounters with Jesus. Do you keep them to yourself or do you share them?*

The third Sunday of September we get a story about Peter. You all know I have a special fondness for Peter [and Paul]- They both allow their humanness to show through the passion and the stupid moments. Peter goes all in, all the time. Peter states that Jesus is *“the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”*. Can’t get faith much stronger than that! But the next moment, Peter is rebuking Jesus. Sadly, for us, Jesus brings things back around saying the hard things again and challenging us. Jesus reminds us that we are called to do more and to be more. Then Jesus sets a blueprint of what we need to do: a) deny ourselves, b) to pick up our cross and c) follow him. None of these are easy things to do. We like our comforts. We would like things easy. Following Jesus is hard. Our belief and love in someone greater than ourselves give us the strength needed to deny ourselves. It gives us the perseverance to pick up our cross and carry on. It gives us the power to follow. Jesus never said it would be easy; in fact, he frequently warns us just the opposite! Jesus looks to the heart and faith of his people and he looks with the eyes of love, compassion, and mercy. *Have you ever felt challenged beyond what you thought you were capable of? What did you do? How did it turn out?*

The fourth Sunday we have Jesus traveling to Capernaum. As frequently happens when a group of people travel together for a while, little irritations start to show up. A bit of bickering. A challenge of who’s better than who. The disciples were no different. Jesus calls them out about it. Jesus does a bit of foreshadowing. He states that that the person who wants to be greatest needs to be a servant to the others. Jesus does this at the Passover meal when he washes the feet of his disciples. Then, Jesus puts a child in front of them and tells them they must welcome this child. We look at this and think, who wouldn’t help a child? Or protect a child? Or welcome a child? But children were not important in society. Even today, children aren’t thought of as “important” members of society. Jesus was making a point. We cannot be good followers if we are focused on being important in society. We need to be better than that. We need to be a servant. We need to be aware of those in need; and moreover, do something. Too often we as human beings look around and see someone in need and respond with, “That’s SEP [Someone Else’s Problem]”. Or we look and see the insurmountable issues and throw up our hands and say, “I can’t do anything about this; it’s too big”. You see? Jesus *challenges* us – with small steps, small choices, and even small helping hands. Really, we *can do* the small. And that’s where we, as individuals, must begin.

Is it just me, or does Jesus get a little more morbid the closer he gets to Jerusalem? This last Sunday in September he is talking about cutting off body parts to keep from losing eternal life. He talks about being salted with fire. I think he is trying to prepare them for what will follow. They need, as we all do, to hear the hard truths. Ministry is hard. It involves service and sacrifice. Those first followers did not live long, happy, healthy lives. Our Saints and Martyrs are Saints and Martyrs because of the long rough road they walked to follow in Jesus’s footsteps. We are lucky that most of us will not have our faith challenged to the point of death. Yet, for others in our current world this is still not quite as true, even today. In some ways, I think the day-to-day relatively “Easy Life” (which most of us enjoy) makes it very challenging to live in faith and ministry. Sounds odd, but bear with me: If someone came into church one Sunday and said, *“If you don’t renounce your faith and leave the building, I will kill you. Right now. Right here.”* I would hope, and in my mind, I would stay. It’s a quick and powerful

decision. The day-to-day living of faith authentically and fully is very hard. It's every day, every hour, every minute, making decisions to act out of love, to see Jesus in the people you encounter, to answer the call of God, and to give water in the name of Jesus. *Jesus challenges each of us in our vocation in life. He challenges us to live as Christians. To give water to the little, the lowly, the unseen, the forgotten, the dismissed, the untouchable.*