



“Plowing Through”

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***June 27, 2010
Luke 9:51–62 (NRSV)***

Late in the early spring of 1975, the community in which I grew up was abuzz with preparations for our church’s centennial, and our town’s diamond jubilee. It was a memorable time in a kitschy sort of way.

My sister and I shopped for and purchased costumes for the celebration at the bicentennial store. We settled on coordinating 1920’s-style “swimming costumes.” You know the type: long skirts, puffy sleeves, and bloomers that went below your knees. Marlene’s outfit was dark blue with white stars, and red bows. Mine was medium blue with large orange polka-dots, and orange bows. We both had hair bonnets and wore flip-flops to match. All together we made quite a scene.

I remember that my dad and all the men in town had to buy a sponsorship license for the festivities which was in the form of a booster button that had to be worn whenever they were in town for the celebration. The license choices were a button that said, “Shaving License,” or a button that said, “License to Grow a Beard.” The price of each was the same: \$10.

Ten dollars seemed like a lot of money to me, particularly back then and for something silly, and I didn’t hesitate to tell my father that I thought so. (This was, after all, a man who didn’t hesitate to tell his children that we wanted too much if we asked for a 15-cent Coke when we were in town or at the truck stop with him.)

My father explained that the way things worked during the anniversary celebrations was that if men were in town and caught without their shaving or beard licenses, they would be thrown into the “town jail” in the city park, and their wives would have to come and bail them out. He explained further that the bail price was \$50. So, suffice it to say, there was no true-blue Swede in Albert City who was going to go through the embarrassment of having to pay \$50 to be bailed out of jail when he could have paid \$10 up front, and that included my fiscally conservative father.

My mother's involvement in the anniversary festivities largely centered around getting my sister and me ready for the Independence Day parade, and making a lot of food to contribute to the church cafeteria that was run throughout the week to help raise money for the church budget. The fare that was served was similar to what Stephanie and I served at the "Grandma Dinner" last August, except for that there was a lot more variety and the food was served in much larger quantities.

The outfits were fun. The food was yummy. And the shaving and beard licenses were highway robbery. But the most memorable part of the celebration for me was the pioneer farming demonstration that was held at a farm near the edge of town.

My grandparents and some of my grandma's sisters' families had held onto farm machinery which their parents (and they) used during the pioneer days. My dad and his cousins were asked to bring that machinery for show and tell, and to demonstrate how it was used in pioneer days at the century farming exhibit.

This demonstration and the preparations for it gave the oldest men in my family no small amount of pleasure. They did not miss the pioneer-style farming at all. They had farmed with draft animals as young people, and they, as John Schaap once put it, "had seen enough of the 'south side' of a draft horse to last them a lifetime." Clearly, however, their grandchildren had not, and the old people were delighted to give us grandkids a taste of what "real work" was like, without modern conveniences and automated farm equipment.

I still remember being in the backyard behind my great-grandparents' house, which they homesteaded over 135 years ago, and hearing my Great Uncle Eben shouting orders over the fence from his lawn chair about how to get a draft horse in a harness and cut a straight furrow with a single moldboard plow.

My dad and his cousin, Paul, meanwhile, were on the other side of the fence trying to keep my cousins (Doug, Dennis, and Neal) from getting kicked by the draft horse, while they practiced for the Fourth of July demonstration by plowing their mother's kitchen garden. You see, the draft horse didn't have any more common sense or experience farming than the boys did.

Three generations got involved in this pioneer farming project in the spring and summer of '76, and there was a lot of practicing for the sod-busting demonstration—because the older generations knew that this activity would bring out their peers who knew how to farm in the old ways, and there was a lot of family pride at stake in getting the demonstration right.

That summer my generation learned that the key to getting the furrows straight was to cut the first furrow right, by whistling at the horse to move, pushing down on the plow handles and holding them steady, while setting your sights on a focal

point in the distance and periodically looking down the path a few feet ahead in order to stop the horse in time if you were about to hit a rock that was large enough to shatter the plowshare.

My cousins and I quickly learned that things could get messed up fast if the person driving the plow lost focus on the target and the path ahead.

II

The thought occurred to me this week that the way that plowing was done in the American frontier wasn't much different than the way it was done in Jesus' day. So, the lesson that Jesus taught his first followers was a lesson that our pioneer ancestors—and every generation in between—would have understood without interpretation. That lesson was about how to successfully face rejection and adversity, and still accomplish ones' purposes.

Today's gospel reading is from the part of Luke's gospel that is often referred to as "the travel narratives." If you get out a map and try to plot Jesus' path as the stories unfold in their textual order, you will see that there is no logical progression from one place to the next.

Luke scholars believe that this is so because the author was far more interested in the theological meaning of events and teachings than in historical documentation of Jesus' ministry. In the case of today's reading, Jesus' teaching and Luke's purpose was to warn his followers about the costs of discipleship.

The meta-message in Luke 9 was "caveat emptor," i.e., buyer beware! Following Jesus will result in rejection by others, adversity of all types, and for Jesus, martyrdom. Discipleship required total loyalty, and daily challenges. He and his followers were totally dependent on the hospitality of strangers. He and they would have to make hard choices, not just between good and evil, but between better and best choices, i.e., between burying the dead and following Jesus, and between saying goodbye to family and staying focused on God's mission. Jesus said, "...anyone who turns his back on the plough isn't fit for the kingdom of heaven."

Luke used dramatic comparisons and strong language to warn his followers of the demands that lay ahead. The disciples really didn't get what Jesus was talking about before the going got tough.

James and John, for example, hovered around Jesus when things were going well while Jesus was popular and his ministry was experiencing a real growth spurt. They liked the feeling of power and influence associated with him, and they want to exercise some of it on the Samaritans who had been inhospitable to Jesus and the rest of them. So they said to Jesus, "How about we show the Samaritans a little 'shock and awe?'"

James and John, those sons of Zebedee (which means “Sons of Thunder”) weren’t so different than my rowdy cousins (Doug, Dennis, and Neal). They were boys who needed supervision.

Like my Great Uncle Eben shouting directions from across the fence to my cousins, Jesus shouts an emphatic, “No!” to James and John’s proposal to torch the Samaritans.

Jesus then went on to tell the boys that if they were going to follow him, they would have to abandon their “eye-for-an-eye and tooth-for-a-tooth” ethics.

Imagine the scene. Those boys must have been disappointed. That kind of worldly rejection and Jesus’ other-worldly restraint surely was different from what they thought that they had signed up for. Still, according to Luke, they hung around for a while—at least until the Garden of Gethsemane—and returned to be part of Christ’s global mission on the Day of Pentecost.

III

One doesn’t have to be a farmer to know that farming has changed a lot since the American pioneer days. Farming has become highly mechanized since World War II, and many of the things that were once done by hand are now done by equipment. Many tasks that took several days can now be accomplished in a matter of hours.

The way in which tasks are completed has changed too. Take plowing, for example. Since the invention and integration of tractors into modern agriculture, plows have been pulled behind tractors rather than situated between the farmer and the draft animal.

The person driving the tractor must now alternate between looking ahead and looking behind in order to cut a straight furrow, and keep the plowshares from being damaged by large rocks.

Still, one thing has not changed. That is the significance of Jesus’ message that discipleship requires focus—focus on God’s mission. Jesus called his first disciples, and set the example for every generation, to stay focused on God’s mission.

Jesus’ message was and is eternally practical. Everyone in Jesus’ and Luke’s first-century audiences knew exactly what was meant when he said, “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” They knew that Jesus was challenging them to be more focused on God’s mission than they had ever thought about being before.

The same is true in our time. In preparing for today's 145th Annual Meeting of our church, and contemplating the many and varied challenges that we've been through as a congregation, I believe that we have come this far and fared this well, because we have remained focused on God's mission. Or, as the spiritual goes, "[We've kept] our eyes on the prize."

Reflect for a moment on the things we've been through even in the last year or so, not to mention the past 145 years, and I think you'll agree—the reason that our membership continues to grow, the reason that our programs continue to expand in scope and quality, the reason that we are able to maintain our beautiful campus and welcome the public to this sacred space, is because we have stayed focused on the mission of God in this place.

We haven't done everything perfectly. We haven't accomplished every goal. There's still room for improvement. There's still work to be done. But by God's grace, we have plowed some good looking furrows in the Eden garden. We have planted seeds that have taken root. And, so long as we keep ourselves focused on God's mission, the harvest will be plentiful. That's what Jesus promised. That's what Luke believed. That's what the example of our ancestors bears out. May God grant that we may be living witnesses to this promise. Amen.