

WHO'S IN YOUR CANOE?

You Need Partners for the Journey

Text: Eccles 4:12; Mark 6:7; Mark 14:32-38; Matt 18:20; James 2:2-4

Great Adventure Series (Part 5)

Stages of the Adventure

The Christian life is a journey toward learning to love God, ourselves, and others the way Jesus does. It is a pathway on which Christ calls us to develop a dramatically greater kind of spiritual and relational health. Like all journeys, the Great Adventure with Jesus involves starts and stops, delays and detours, hilltops and valleys, sunny days and rainy ones. As much variety as there is, however, there are also certain predictable stages or phases on this adventure.

There are periods when we're absorbed with all that we are DISCOVERING. We're waking up to God or the spiritual life in fresh ways and it is really exciting. We get this new vision of who God is or who we are and where we want to go from here. The journey toward greater spiritual and relational health feels so full of promise. With fresh sight for the pathway, we set forth to follow Christ.

This phase usually leads to a period when we are focused on NURTURING this new life. We start to experiment with some soul-training exercises between weekends. Maybe we get into a daily devotional pattern or start practicing some of the other classic spiritual disciplines. Perhaps we start seeking better equipment for a healthy life by picking up a good book on forgiveness, or taking a class on marriage or parenting, or getting resourced for more Christ-like living with our finances or some other sphere of life.

As we start to feel more clarity and confidence, we enter a period of the journey with Christ where we are increasingly focused on ACTING out what we've discovered and nurtured. We're volunteering for servant-leader roles at our church. We're practicing Christian principles in our home and workplace and other spheres of life. We're giving our resources more generously, or sharing our faith more frequently, trying to help others onto the great adventure with Christ.

And as we keep going on this journey, we are slowly becoming more LOVING. We are growing more connected with God, more aware of our true self, more concerned for the well-being of others. In other words, we are becoming more spiritually and relationally healthy. This is the LANDscape of the Christian journey. [Map graphic]

But then, somewhere along this journey, we come to an impasse. Some people

think of it like a Great Wall rising up before us. I think of it like a Raging River with no bridge. You're not going further on the spiritual journey until you've made this CROSSING but, when you reach it, you don't know how.

When You Reach the River

Maybe you've been to the River yourself. It might have taken the form of a marital crisis, or an actual divorce, or the realization that you may never have the life partner you want. It could be fertility problems, or the exhaustion of mothering children. The loss of a job or the death of a loved one might be your River. You can be plunged into it by a serious illness or a devastating accident or a cross-country move. I've seen the River take the form of a disillusioning church experience or a financial calamity or a shattered dream.

The River is ANY life experience that is clearly deeper, wider, and stronger than you. You can't deny it. You can't control it. You don't know how you'll cross it. In the face of the River, your faith no longer seems to work. You don't know where God is or what he is doing in these circumstances. You may have severe doubts that HE even knows what he's doing, if he exists at all. Your prayers seem to hit the ceiling and bounce back. Have you been to the River? Are you there right now?

What is so hard to perceive at such moments is that this River is not only an obstacle to your progress, but also an opportunity for it. You see, if our aim is to get truly and fully healthy, if we are to get to the point where we love God and others purely, then there are some unhealthy things about us that need to be dug out and drowned. St. John of the Cross, the brilliant 16th century Christian leader, calls these unhealthy things the "Deadly Imperfections."

For example, a lot of us travel a long distance in life bearing within us a very stubborn PRIDE. Whether openly or secretly, we are impatient with and condemning of others. We feel that few people can teach us much. Within many of us is also what St. John calls the spirit of AVARICE. We keep seeking spiritual satisfaction in external engagements – in reading books, or going to religious events, or doing good deeds -- rather than finding our satisfaction in poverty of spirit and the work of the inner life. Some of us are afflicted with an addiction to LUXURY. That is, we are far more interested in gaining blessings from God than in knowing God.

Many of us suffer from what St. John called the sickness of WRATH. When things don't go the way we like or expect, we get impatient, irritated, or angry. GLUTTONY is a serious issue for many of us. We stuff ourselves with pleasures (like a child does) and resist the sacrificial way of the cross. A lot of us suffer with ENVY. We feel quietly frustrated or jealous that others seem to have a more satisfying life than we do. Or finally, we may be plagued by SLOTH. We

say we want to be spiritually and relationally health, but we refuse, rebel against, or run from the hard work of growth.

God may forgive this sin-sickness. It can be slowly dissipated through the kind of soul training and equipping we've been talking about in recent weeks. But nothing so effectively kills and clears away these diseases as entering the River of suffering. It's not a given that it will work this way, of course. Some people come through crises more selfish and broken than ever. But there is always this opportunity the waters of adversity give us to have our sinful affections and obsessions passions washed away, so that our consolation is increasingly found more in God, rather than in the idolatries that formerly controlled us (James 2:2-4).

I have, personally, never gotten used to paddling my way through conflict, failure, loss, grief, or any other kind of hardship. It feels like misery every time. But I have noticed that each time I've trudged out on the opposite shore of these Rivers, I have emerged a better man. Less sickness, more health. Jesus said it might work this way. It's another reason why these passages through the turbulent water we meet on the spiritual journey are appropriately called "CROSSings." **"If any want to become my followers,"** said Jesus, **"let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their [old] life for my sake will find [a greater life]"** (Matt 16:24-25).

Don't Try to Cross Alone

In the passage from Mark's Gospel we read earlier, we meet Jesus as he's about to enter an immense River of Suffering. He is going to make the ultimate CROSSing, right? He will emerge on the other side of the River we call Calvary healthier than ever before – stripped of everything but the victorious life of God, greater than death itself. But even so, Jesus does something at this point in his Great Adventure that I want you to especially notice, because it has such implications for you and me.

At a place on the shoreline called Gethsemane, Jesus climbs into the boat of destiny that will bear him to the Cross. But as he is stepping in, he reaches out for Peter, James, and John, and says: Come paddle with me, guys. **"Sit here while I pray... Stay here and keep watch"** with me, he asks (Mark 14:32-34). Jesus knows that there is greater life beyond the Raging River he faces but, still, he wants companions with him. Even Jesus doesn't try to cross alone.

If Jesus felt that, how much more do you and I need Partners for the Journey? I mean, you can try to go on the Great Adventure of discipleship by yourself. You can show up at big jamborees like this one and enjoy the party. But it is so much better to have partners for the journey.

As I've frequently shared, if I've made any progress in my own journey, it has largely been because of the people I journey with every week. In addition to some individual Christian mentors and friends, I meet with two different small groups each week. I learn so much from their sight for the pathway, the spiritual training disciplines they use, the equipping resources we're able to study together. I'd have gotten way off track and maybe given up long ago, if it weren't for them. I'd have gotten stuck in my marriage, in my parenting, in my work or social patterns, were it not for these partners, prodding me, praying for me, sometimes even carrying me.

It is not accidental that Jesus sent out his disciples two by two (Mark 6:7). It is not insignificant that Christ said that when two or three gathered in his name he was especially present (Matt 18:20). There is a message for more than Boy Scouts in the wisdom of Ecclesiastes that "**Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. And a cord of three strands is not quickly broken**" (Eccles 4:12).

Here's the bottom line: If you don't have Partners for the Journey, get some. Ask one, two, three, or more people to be your companions on the Great Adventure. Ask the church staff for help in finding such partners, if you'd value the assistance. Because when you get to the next River, when you're trying to make the Crossing to an even greater life, you'll want people you can count on to stay with you and paddle for life with you. It will matter WHO is in your canoe.

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