

“Retracing Our Footsteps in Faith”

Mark 8:31-38

The Rev. Karen Cobb

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Thank you, Frank, for the invitation to preach this morning. We have built a relationship week after week by worshiping together, yet this is a special opportunity to reflect with you on a challenging and central text from Mark’s gospel. It’s also a chance for each of us to reflect on the turning points in our lives and the intersections of our faith in the midst of our daily relationships. For the next few minutes I will be retracing some of my own footsteps. But, I hope you will consider this the beginning of our conversation about the funny and poignant and revealing moments we have with each other that provide us with new awareness into our journey of discipleship.

It’s been a gentle, powerful, transformational summer for me. As many of you know, my kids Clarissa and Tore have been away for most the summer, having their own renewing adventures. For the first summer in fourteen years, I have had some solitary time in which to breathe new rhythm marked by the walking of my dog, the attendance to my counseling work, the furrowing in my garden, the quiet evenings with friends on my patio.

This past month has also included two important milestones for me: one to Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota for my 25th college reunion and the other, just last week was to attend the Presbyterian Women’s Churchwide Gathering in Louisville, Kentucky. It was twenty-five years ago that I began my studies at McCormick Seminary in Chicago. Even if I hadn’t been retracing my steps lately, Frank’s invitation to the pulpit for THIS Sunday would have brought my reflections into synchronistic focus.

I want to share one encounter in particular. In the first gathering at my reunion, one stood out from the rest. He was a tall, tan, brightly smiling, completely bald man ...in a saffron-colored robe and flip flops. To put this in context, Jim had been the blond, curly-haired drummer in the rock band I sang with freshman year. Yes, I told you this was a story about transformation. I moved to shake his hand but he drew his hands together and bowed to me instead. We both smiled, as I realized that part of Jim’s calling as a Tibetan Buddhist monk, includes shaving his head, giving away all his possessions and never touching a woman, not out of a sense of impurity but out of a disavowal of all earthly attachments. Jim was always a friend to me, but he was also had many girlfriends, including my freshman roommate, Barb. His opening words to me were, “So, are you a nun?”

“No, I’m not a nun,” I laughed as I took out pictures of Tore and Clarissa. I’m a mother and a Presbyterian minister, but I make my living as a children’s sand tray therapist.” What takes more explaining, however, is that both our paths have taken

years of defining through meditation, examining, clarifying, and releasing attachment to unhealthy illusions that distract us from our deepest calling, to be disciples in honest loyalty to our God, Buddha for Jim and Jesus, for me.

Twenty-nine years ago, with other friends, we were spending more time with the Rolling Stones and The Who than we should have been spending with our studies, but eventually we both became religion majors. Jim spent junior year spring term in Sri Lanke studying Buddhism, while I went to Marburg, Germany to study the Protestant Reformation. It's funny how one choice leads to another. I came this close to going to Sri Lanke that year. Eventually, Jim gave up all his possessions, including his beloved drum set for a one way ticket to Tibet. In 1990 he was ordained and took on a new name, Ajahn Chandako and a life of solitary meditation and strict discipline as a mendicant monk. Ajahn is now the abbot of a Buddhist monastery near Auckland, New Zealand. 1990 was the same year I was ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, six months into my marriage, requiring a two hour commute, twice a week to another state in order to accept the call.

The gospel of Mark reports Jesus' admonition "If any want to become my followers, let them take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their own life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

I have learned in the past twenty-five years that life is not always what it seems or as I would have imagined it, decently and in order. Twenty-five years ago Jim left behind all his worldly attachments for a cave. I left family and friends behind to enter seminary in the midst of a multicultural city of six million. I have wrestled with my right to preach and my yearning to answer the call to be a healer and bearer of the liberating word of Jesus Christ. I have received my share of letters that began, "Thank you for submitting your dossier to our Pastor Nominating Committee. Unfortunately, your gifts do not match the needs of our church at this time." I have also had the opportunity to pastor in three congregations, as an interim, as an associate and as a solo pastor, baptizing, moderating, consecrating, preaching, teaching, marrying, burying, and leading or hosting mission trips. I have also had the unbelievably rich experience of bearing and raising two healthy, beautiful kids whom I baptized into Christ's church. My experience tells me that God is not through with me yet. Nor with you.

As a good Calvinist, I know that nothing I can do will bring fruit without Christ's blessing. And yet, I am called to discipleship in community with you and with the whole world. Sitting alone in prayer and stewing in my own thoughts is not enough.

But, there is movement in silence too. Although I am still a novice, I have been retrained and retraining in the discipline of listening and healing through the therapy of sand tray, philosophically based on the work of Carl Jung. These days my sermons are preached mostly in silence and illustrated through the imaginative and often traumatic play of children who like us, can heal the broken edges if given

respectful affirmation, safe boundaries and silent witness of their emerging stories. Sometimes I offer observations on their process of choosing certain combinations of objects to tell their stories; sometimes I ask questions to help me to understand what they are trying to express. The grace I try to preach every day is the wordless acceptance of each struggling life, stumbling toward wholeness. In my most honest moments, I know that I am that person, and I suspect, so are you. The connection we crave so desperately is to be known by God and by each other and recognized as one who is lovable, redeemable of all our failings, and capable of better things than we ever imagined.

As a Calvinist, I must observe and confess my belief that we do our best each day, to avoid the fullness of the demands of Christ's call to total discipleship, through our distractibility by material things, by being prone to meddle in relationships instead of mending them; of attaching too much of ourselves to our failures and to our successes. But, and this is vital, we also glimpse God's glory each day in the restoring of wholeness in our lives, in the restoring of our relationships, in the healing of our broken places, and in the preaching of God's grace and hope to our beautiful and broken world.

John Calvin was no champion of women's rights. Like the powerful men of his day, and yes, they were all men, he believed that women had their place in marriage and in civil society as subordinates of men. But, he was also an earnest student of scripture in Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic and Latin, so he learned that scripture, cross-referenced against other scripture tends to correct its apparent inconsistencies. The context of scripture tells much about the hearers and the bearers of it, as well as their and our perspective on the God who cannot be contained. Calvin was wise, faithful and honest enough to conclude that by God's grace, freedom and power, the Holy Spirit will rest on whomever God chooses to bear it, as long as it is faithful to the message of challenge and redemption in Jesus Christ. So must the church humble itself to be changed and challenged. The Church of Jesus Christ must stay relevant to its context and radically obedient to God's insistent call in order to preach challenge to the powerful and grace to the weary in this world. The trick is to preach both messages often, at the same time and to the same people.

As far as the continuing formation of this erstwhile preacher, farther than the journey to become a preacher, farther than the journey to walk away from preaching, or at least to take an active break from it, is the journey of discipleship which is lifelong. I realized this most powerfully at the Presbyterian Women's Gathering where I witnessed the electrifying commissioning of 57 new mission workers to go out into the world as ambassadors of Christ. I wondered, as I felt pride for our church and tears in my eyes and the familiar tingle of the Holy Spirit shuddering through my body, "Wow! What would that be like, to leave behind everything, including my language to go where I'm needed? Maybe someday. . ."

The next morning, during closing worship, as I consecrated communion and offered “The cup of the new covenant poured out for you” for 2500 gathered, I was stunned and deeply incredulous at the grace in my life that unfolds before me.

Is it like that for you too?

Christ died for all the world, but Christ also died for each of us, so that we might know that true freedom comes from a life given back to us and given up by us in service and sacrifice and loving each other, as Christ first loved us. As the PW Gathering hymn reminded us all week long, and as we will sing in a few minutes,

**“God will do wonders among you. Alleluia!
Stomp your feet and clap your hands for
God will do wonders among you.
Raise your voice and sing to God a brand, new song!” Amen.**