

September 25, 2011

INTO THE FRAY

In Stephen Ambrose's wonderful chronicle, *Undaunted Courage*, the history of Meriwether Lewis and the Lewis and Clark expedition, he writes of the moment when Meriwether Lewis and his companions reach the point beyond which no white man has ever gone. They are on the Missouri river just beyond Fort Mandan and they are entering into completely uncharted territory. Ambrose describes it this way:

“Lewis was now stepping into the unknown ... into the heart of darkness. Deserts, mountains, great cataracts, warlike Indian tribes – he could not imagine them, because no American had ever seen them. But, far from causing apprehension or depression, the prospect brought out his fullest talents. He knew that from now on, until he reached the Pacific and returned, he would be making history. He was exactly what Jefferson wanted him to be, optimistic, prudent, alert to all that was new about him ... His ambition was boundless. His determination was complete. He could not, would not, contemplate failure.

Lewis, Ambrose continues, had come to a point that he longed for, worked for, dreamed of all of his life.

He was ready, intensely alive ... He stepped forward into Paradise.”

I don't know about you ... but the prospects of a journey like that undertaken by these early American explorers is not something I would describe as Paradise. It's downright overwhelming and terrifying to me. Uncharted territory. The unknown around every bend. Each new day possibly being your last. To me ... that's just not paradise. That's just a path I would prefer to avoid.

Some of you have in your cars a GPS system. I have one. When I turn it on and set my destination it tells me that I have some options on the routing I can take. I can take the route that maximizes freeways. I can take the route that minimizes freeways. I can take the route that is the most direct. But I am not offered the uncharted route. The route not yet taken. The GPS will not guide me to the place where there is no road, no path, no freeway. If I get to the point the lady comes on and says, “Turn around.” Nor will it take me to the danger route. This is not an option on my GPS – this route maximizes danger. Dangerous and uncharted are not what my GPS considers paradise. It is assumed that these are routes I'd rather avoid. I am quickly told to turn around. For this I am grateful, and I suppose you are too.

So we can understand a little I suppose what was going on in Peter's mind in our lesson this morning. Peter has just done perhaps the most amazing thing he has done in his life. When Jesus puts it on the line and asks the disciples who they think he is ... "Who do you say that I am?" -- it is Peter before all the others who takes the great leap of faith ... the jump over the canyon and says to Jesus, "You're the one, aren't you? You're the one we've been waiting for. The one we've been waiting for for generations and centuries. The one God promised would come. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." And Jesus affirms him. Applauds him for the revelation that the Father has given him. And tells him that he will be the rock of the church.

But then Jesus changes course. Now that he has made it clear that he is in fact the Messiah – Jesus explains that he is changing course and he is turning his face toward Jerusalem. He is heading south from the northern most parts of Palestine and he is heading toward Jerusalem. And he expects that when he gets to Jerusalem that it will not go well. He will be confronted by the religious powers that be ... he will be betrayed, accused, arrested and condemned and he will be crucified. He will die. But after his death he will be raised. This is the path that he is going to take.

And so Peter when he hears Jesus plotting out his course ... punching his destination into his GPS ... Peter who has just managed to get it so right a moment ago – steps into the path that Jesus is just about ready to start down and says – “No way. Not going to happen. Listen, I’ve just got through calling you Messiah and in my book Messiahs do not subject themselves to scorn and ridicule and betrayal and trumped up charges and false imprisonment and torture and cowardly Roman authorities and horrific suffering and execution. That’s not what Messiahs do. Messiahs stay out of the fray. Messiahs don’t get their hands dirty. Messiahs don’t risk themselves in some dangerous mission. So forget it Jesus, you’re not going.”

And then Jesus says maybe the most shocking thing he’s ever said: “Get behind me, Satan. In one moment, Peter, you never got it so right. And in the next moment you never got it so wrong.” In one moment what Jesus hears out of Peter’s mouth is the voice of God. God revealing to Peter that he is the Messiah. Music to his ears. But then in another moment what he hears out of Peter’s mouth is the voice of Satan. He hears the tempting voice of Satan saying to him that maybe there is an easier way of being Messiah. Maybe it doesn’t have to be so hard. Maybe it doesn’t have to be so dangerous. Maybe the Messiah can avoid the fray. Maybe there is an easier street.

It's the same voice he hears in the Garden of Gethsemane. As the cross cast its shadows upon him and as the moment of truth arrives, Jesus hits his knees and says to his Father, "Might there be another path? Might there be another way of being Messiah? Might there be a way of loving the world that doesn't involve so much pain? Might I avoid the fray? Might this cup pass from me?"

But Jesus already knows the answer, doesn't he? He knows what Messiahs do. He knows that to be Messiah means to step into the fray. It's the way it's always been. Ever since his birth it has been a step into the fray. Born into the fray of a dirty manger and unclean shepherds and a wicked king. Living with the fray of people who don't quite get the love and mercy of God. Walking with the fray of disciples who don't quite understand the purposes of the kingdom. Religious leaders who are more worried about their position ... than about the needs of the people.

No, Jesus says to Peter, it's time to step into the fray. Time to take up the cross. Time to love the world even if the world won't love me back. Time to take on the sins of the world. Time to do battle with the forces of evil. Time to take up the cross. And if you want to follow me, Peter ... you have to take up your cross too.

You see there came this point in Jesus' life – maybe it was the point of Jesus' life – where it became clear to him and to others – that life was not about comfort. Life was not about taking the easy street. Life was not about avoiding the fray. Life was about doing what needed to be done to love the world.

Life is about doing what needs to be done to love the world.

Some of you have heard me talk about a book called *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl – a Jewish psychologist arrested and sent to a concentration camp by the Nazi's during World War II. The book is about the quest for life's meaning while living in what might appear to be a meaningless place. Frankl observed in his time in the camp that many had given their lives over to despair and hopelessness. They grew bitter and angry. Even turned on themselves. And what Frankl observed was that those who were having the hardest time were those who lamented that life was not what they thought it was going to be. They expected life to be one way ... and it turned out to be another way. Not just another way, but a terrible, unspeakably awful way. And they couldn't get over the fact that they were not going to get out of life what they expected. They were not going to realize, maybe, what their dream was.

“What was needed,” Frankl writes, “was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly ... Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.”

So Jesus says to Peter, “It does not matter what you or I expect from life ... but what matters is what life expects from us. And what life expects from Messiahs ... what life expects from those who follow Messiahs is to do what needs to be done to love and save the world.”

Ten days ago Marine Sergeant Dakota Meyer was awarded a medal of honor by the President for how he responded to the ambush upon his unit and his fellow soldiers. While the orders were to stay away from the killing zone – avoid the fray – Sergeant Dakota Meyer refused the order and with two others went in anyway. He entered the fray. Life expected something. Life was questioning Dakota Meyer. And he responded – risking all his own hopes and dreams ... and doing what needed to be done.

But the truth is you and I are not going to be serving anytime soon a Marine unit in the theater of war. Small chance that we will be thrown into a concentration camp either. Seldom does life present such stark choices – such life and death options. But the truth is there is a fray in each one of our lives. Some sort of brokenness or injustice. Some sort of harder path to travel. It may be that every ounce in our body tells us that that's the last place to go. A little voice that says – best not to go to Jerusalem. Best not to take up the cross. Best not to love the world ... it will only get you hurt. Best to stay safe. Best to hedge your bet. Best to not get involved. Stay with what you expect from life and not what life expects from you.

So I have this friend who with his wife weren't sure that God was calling them to be parents. They weren't sure they were gifted. But after years of thought and prayer... a child entered their lives. And when the child came to them there was great celebration. There was great hope. And they loved the child. The child was God's gift to them. And they loved the child. They gave everything they thought to give that child over the years that child grew. But as the child grew in teenage years ... the child began not to return the love the parents were offering. Rebellion, disregard and hatred followed. The child got into more and more trouble. The child ran away. The child walked entirely out of the parents' lives. It's been 10 years since they've seen the child. In one of the conversations I had with my friend in which he expressed to me all the pain he and his wife had gone through trying to love this child who would not in the end love them back – I asked him if he had to do it over again would he have done the same

thing? And without a pause he said back – Without a doubt I would. That child gave me the chance to love in a way no other child could. And whose to know that maybe the only love that child will ever get is the love we had to give.

It's not what we expect from life, but what life expects from us.

Years ago I found a poem that I have since learned has been attributed to a host of people, most popularly to Mother Theresa. It goes like this:

People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered.

Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.

Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you win false friends and true enemies.

Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.

Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.

Be honest and frank anyway.

The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds.

Think big anyway.

People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.

Fight for a few underdogs anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.

Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you do help them.

Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth.

Give the world the best you have anyway.

“If any want to become my followers,” Jesus says, “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 life for my sake will find it.”

Follow me, Jesus says, into the fray. For it is not what you expect from life, but what life expects from you.