

## **The Third Sunday after Epiphany January 22, 2017**

Several years ago I heard Brennan Manning speak. Brennan Manning was a wonderful teacher who said a couple of things that left a permanent imprint on my mind and heart. One was the way he described the Christian life. Using imagery from the American frontier and the Wild West, he spoke of two very different views of life. One he called “Settler Theology.” The other he called “Pioneer Theology.”

Settler theology is all about, well ... *settling*. In this view of life, the primary goal of life is to keep the rules, obey the town ordinances and keep your nose clean. A settler doesn't venture out into the frontier because it is way too unsettling. It is best to be safe and secure. In settler theology God is the mayor and the church is the courthouse where records are kept and criminals are tried. The whole point of the settler view is to keep law and order and to maintain stability. Faith in the settler way of life is all about keeping your nose clean and trusting in the security of the town. To be Christian is to stay away from the unknown, open frontier. The primary focus is to be on good terms with the mayor and to keep the status quo.

In contrast, “Pioneer Theology” embraces the open frontier. The pioneer sees the church as a covered wagon always moving toward the future. The wagon ride isn't always comfortable but comfort isn't the point. Faith is a journey and God is like a Trail Boss who prods the pioneers into new and risky adventures. Operating with a pioneer theology, a Christian is always hungry for new life.

I don't know about you, but many times I find myself leaning into the settler option. I like it when life is safe, comfortable and without surprise. And as soon as I begin to make my home there Jesus has this way of pulling me back to himself. When I pay close attention to Jesus then my life gets a little unsettled and I am reminded again that Jesus calls us always, as a favorite prayer likes to put it: “... to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage not knowing where we go but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us.”

Jesus calls us to the open trail and to embrace the spirit of the pioneer. And the wonderful and exciting and at the same time disturbing and scary thing of the journey is we aren't always sure of the destination. We dwell in uncertainty. If we can be certain about anything in this journey it is that God loves along the way and we are free to follow Jesus' lead along the way.

Jesus call to you and to me is this: “Follow me.” It is the perennial call of Jesus. Follow him.

When Jesus said “follow me” to Peter and Andrew they dropped everything to follow him. They left their jobs. They forsook their livelihood. They took a risk. When Jesus called James and John to follow him they also left their fishing nets behind and their father. Poor Zebedee was left

holding the nets and was abandoned by his sons. They left not only their work but their family too. You see, following Jesus costs something. It's risky business.

What is the risk? What does it cost us?

I had a friend in Oregon who wrestled mightily with his faith and his sense of call. He often wondered how he could, in good conscience, continue to work for an organization whose aims and values and goals were diametrically opposed to his core values as one who followed Jesus. For my friend, the faithful response was to quit his job. For a long while he had no work and it didn't make his family very happy at all. The move was risky. It was costly. Yet for my friend, this move was the fruit of careful discernment. He felt his decision was his deepest desire and the very much aligned with his sense of call from God.

Your story of faith may not be so dramatic as that but when we take this journey of following Jesus we discover, sooner or later, that Jesus' call to love is by its very nature risky and costly and inevitably involves change.

The other day I was with one our women's circles and we talked about the many changes they have seen in their lives and in the life of the church. They spoke of taking risks and venturing into new attitudes and new avenues of loving others. What impressed me was how many in the circle reflected on how the ways they have changed over the years is the work of God in their lives and in our life together as church. God, they reminded me, is always in the business of opening our hearts. I was grateful these wise and seasoned Christians – for their presence in my life and in our life together.

You see, Jesus' call to follow is issued to us not just once but always. It is Jesus' persistent call to us. Faith is a journey and true to the nature of a journey, we don't always know the destination, that is, where God will take us and whatever change occurs isn't for the sake of change but a byproduct of growing deeper and deeper in our relationship to God and God's adventure of loving the world.

PRLC is in a discernment process. Some have asked when it will end. The best response to that is "never." Discernment, that is, paying attention to God's presence and following Jesus is a life-long journey and a process that never ends for the church. Nevertheless, we are asking you to visit the wall downstairs and with one of the marking pens add your ideas, the fruit of your discernment as we pray our way into God's future.

Where is God leading PRLC? We don't know for sure but if this journey of following Jesus is anything like what we've known, it will cost us. It will require new commitments and sacrifices and risk. Loving God and neighbor involves these and the journey itself when it looks and feels a lot like Jesus unfolds in loving ways that may run counter to prevailing powers.

Several of you were part of the Women's March yesterday. It was really quite remarkable how many people from all corners of the nation participated. The aim was walk in solidarity with others to stand up for the rights of women everywhere and the rights of all people, especially those who have no voice or those who are so easily maligned or forgotten or ignored.

Did you know the march is guided by principles of nonviolence very similar to those of Martin Luther King, Jr? Do not harm others. Do not do violence to others. Value all relationships and work for reconciliation. Respect the essential dignity of each and every person. Sounds very Jesus like to me. To use a phrase from one of Dr. King's own sermons it is to practice love in the extreme.

That's not a bad way to describe the journey of following Jesus however it looks. In the sermon King expressed disappointment about other pastors who criticized him for being an extremist. He said he was glad to be thought of as an extremist and said in his sermon, "Was not Jesus an extremist?" Then he went on to cite Jesus' command to love our enemies, bless those that curse us, and to pray for those who even spitefully use us. King said, "The question is not whether we will be extremists but what kind of extremists will we be? Extremists for hate or extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the cause of injustice or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?"

And isn't that high ground to which Jesus calls us? And isn't such Gospel extremism the very thing that changes the world and changes lives?

I hope you will come to the Adult Forum today as we continue to explore what it means to welcome friends from the LGBTQ community. I hope you will chime in on the Discernment Process. I hope you will join your council and staff is praying and responding in this never ending journey of following Jesus.

May the journey along the way be marked by extreme love. May the journey of PRLC continue to be and grow even more deeply into the journey of being extremists in love. For this is what pleases God and delights God's heart. Amen.