

“The Other Side”
Shannon Smythe
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Westminster Presbyterian Church
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What is your relationship to Jesus? How do you identify yourself? Do you think of yourself as a Christian? Is it something that you never really consider much because, perhaps, you’ve gone to church for as long as you can remember? Do you identify as religious? Or spiritual? Or would you select for yourself the title of disciple of Jesus? Do you recognize in yourself your intention to follow Jesus, even as that commitment places demands on your life?

How about our church? Do you think of us as a group of nice people? A group of Christians? Or do you recognize Westminster as a group of people, flawed and beautiful, like everyone else, but also committed to following Jesus, to responding to the movement of the Spirit among us, ready to get into the boat, at a moment’s notice and cross over to the other side with Jesus?

I ask these questions because today’s healing story, unlike the healing stories we’ve considered up until now, finds the disciples taking center stage. This is a paradigmatic story about discipleship, about the nature of the relationship of disciples to Jesus. This is a story devoid of crowds. In Matthew’s Gospel, the crowds often follow Jesus because they want something from him. We can, I think, recognize this impulse in ourselves. What do you want from Jesus?

Today’s story is not about the crowds and what they want from Jesus. Jesus has moved away from the crowds, to the other side. And the disciples, in an act of commitment and faith, follow Jesus into the boat, even as they have little understanding of what to expect when they get to the other side. The disciples get into the boat with Jesus not because they want something from him but because he wants something from them. Dear friends, if you are willing to identify as a disciple of Jesus, this is the news I have for you: Jesus wants something of you. Dear church, if we see ourselves together in the boat, having committed together to following Jesus, then hear this: Jesus wants something of us. Jesus wants us to go to the other side with him.

This, you might recognize, presents a few challenges. For one thing, as disciples of Jesus we recognize that our commitment to follow Jesus is about more than what we want from him. Jesus actually wants something from us. So we cannot claim to follow Jesus and then still behave like the crowd—following first and foremost because of what we want from Jesus. As disciples, we follow Jesus knowing that he wants something from us.

And here's the next challenge: we may not know what this thing is. We as a church may not know exactly, in a perfectly crafted and detailed plan, all that Jesus wants from us. We may just have to get into the boat and first follow Jesus through a horrifying storm. And even then, we still may not know what Jesus wants from us when we get to the other side.

In this text, Jesus calls himself the Son of Man and then explains that the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. Following Jesus to the other side, in other words, means following the Son of Man, who had no place to lay his head. Thus, we may have to leave our home, or forsake the comforts of home, to follow Jesus to the other side. Our text today ends at verse 27, but Matthew 8:28 does reveal what is awaiting the disciples on the other side of their boat journey with Jesus. You ready for it? Another country—a foreign, unknown place, Gentile region, a place, in other words, where the disciples will encounter ethnic, political and religious others. Friends, following Jesus means forsaking home base. It means venturing out beyond our security blanket, without clear direction of what is on the other side but knowing that we must be ready to embrace a life of homelessness as we walk into a strange, new country.

I must say that I have found this to be very true of my own discipleship journey with Jesus. I had wanted, for a very long time, something from Jesus: I had wanted my dream job, teaching theology, at my alma mater, Seattle Pacific University. And, after years of working towards that goal, I did get my dream job, in what I could affirm was the movement of God in my life. But I had that dream job for only a few years when it became painfully clear that Jesus wanted something from me. God was calling me out of the academy and into the strange new world of congregational ministry. The past three years of following Jesus to the other side—from academia to ordained ministry in the PC(USA) has been one long, storm ridden experience of following Jesus away from home, away from comfort, away from friends, family, mentors, and into the ministry that God has, including the work God has called me to here with you at Westminster Presbyterian Church.

Can you, like me, affirm this reality to your discipleship? Have you, as a result of heeding Jesus' orders to depart, followed Jesus away from home and family, and into the storm, facing fear, stress, and maybe even the forces of death itself?

What about our church? Are we willing to be a community of Jesus followers who will not just follow Jesus because we want something from him: maybe we want our church to survive, maybe we want young families, maybe we more members and pledges, maybe we want things to stay as they always have been? Will we follow Jesus instead because we recognize that he wants something from us: he wants us to be willing to forsake our favorite ways of doing things, forsake our personal preferences, forsake church the way we like it and have always known it? Will we get into the boat with Jesus, heading to some unknown other side where church might look different, where our building may be used for new things, where we open ourselves up to engage with ethnic, political and religious others who we might have had little experience with?

Friends, our Session of Elders, has gotten into the boat with Jesus, and, along with an appointed Tech Working Team, have committed to venturing to the other side, following

Jesus into a new unknown place, even with the threat of storms that may come. The Session, following the recommendation of the Tech Working Team, has committed to working with Creation Audio, who will be purchasing and installing for us, livestreaming technology and equipment, updated in-house sound equipment, and a central screen and projector. What is on the other side of this? Where is Jesus taking us on this journey? Well, we know that we have left behind the physical sanctuary space that we have always known. There will be changes to our sanctuary with the addition of this technology. But we can also affirm that this will, once it is ready to go, allow us to share our in-house worship, with those who will tune in from home, wherever that may be. This means no one will be left out, but it also might mean so much more. There are many possibilities on the other side. We will be better able to engage with those who may not be ready to enter our physical church building but are ready to worship online with us. We will have the option of virtually incorporating special music, preachers, liturgists in worship who might not be in our physical sanctuary. We will have many more options for how we can bring music and art into our worship services. We may also, if we consider further updates to our church building, be able to host community events and gatherings that we could have never done without this new technology. All of these are exciting possibilities awaiting us on the other side.

But, we may also encounter some storms before we get there. For one thing, we do not know yet how everything works. And we will need to find a person or two to train and pay to use this equipment so that we can do this. We don't know the exact timeline yet, and we may experience some storms of impatience while we continue worship on Zoom or try some outside of the box worship ideas until livestreaming is up and running and we can be back in the sanctuary on a permanent basis. As with any technology, we love it when it works, but we also dread the technical storms that come when things go wrong. We can likely expect to face some storms like that. But perhaps there will be some emotional storms, too. Those storms have irrupted at Westminster in the past, over the sale of the manse. Session and the Tech Working Team realize that they are following Jesus into very new territory that will bring more changes into the life of the congregation. How the congregation experiences these changes may bring with it some storms.

The very great challenge, then, not only for the Session and the Tech Working team but also for this congregation, is to realize this: **all through the storms that may come, Jesus will be with us.** Jesus will be with us through it all, committed to getting us to the other side. We will not perish. Jesus has the power not just over the literal storms of nature, but also over all the storms of life that come as Jesus followers get into the boat with Jesus, crossing over to the other side.

Jesus rebukes the disciples, before he even calms the storm. Why? Because he wants them to understand that as long as he, their Lord, is with them, they have nothing to fear. Church, as we move forward in the boat with Jesus be assured of Jesus' presence with us. Be assured that he is with us to protect us. Be assured that though there are hardships involved in following him to the other side Jesus will never leave or forsake us. Jesus has the power to calm any and all chaotic waters in order to bring us safely to the other side. The one with power over disease and disability is also the one with power over creation

itself. Therefore, Westminster, we can cross to the other side, facing whatever storms may come, knowing that Jesus is powerful over them all, and will not be defeated by any obstacle that gets in the way of his commitment to reach all people and our commitment to follow him in that work. So, take heart and let's keep moving forward together, in faith, as disciples whom Jesus wants something from. Amen!