

Labyrinth

I spent last weekend at a training weekend for the Presbyterian Disaster Response Team. On the grounds of the retreat center where we met was a labyrinth. Unlike the Labyrinth of Minos of Greek legend which was a maze designed to keep both the Minotaur and its sacrifices within the feature, Christian labyrinths have a single path to the center, with no wrong turns or dead ends.

The concept of the Christian labyrinth is to wind your way along the path toward the center. While the path is unerring, it is by no means simple. The path winds back and forth through four quadrants of the labyrinth. As you walk, you cast aside your burdens of care, your pride and self-sufficiency, and your sins, so that when you emerge into the center of the labyrinth, you are both vulnerable and unburdened as you focus on an encounter with God. In the center you take time to pray – to listen with your heart – to what God would reveal to you. You return to the beginning using the same path on which you entered, this time focusing on what you have learned, what you have experienced, and how you are to carry this with you into the world.

I decided to begin my weekend with a walk through the labyrinth. As I entered the labyrinth, it appeared I could walk straight into the center. However as I neared the center I was guided off into the first quadrant. I passed back and forth through that quadrant and was led to the second quadrant. About two-thirds of the way through the labyrinth, I found myself being led all the way back to the first quadrant. Twice I was very near the center – the final time only about a yard from the center when I was led on one last side trip. Finally the way was clear into a small central area, with a straight tree growing in the center of the center with tree stumps in a half circle waiting for rest and prayer.

As I walked this labyrinth, I began to ponder the verses which were for this Sunday's service, especially the Gospel lesson. The labyrinth is such a beautiful metaphor for these difficult verses.

Our Scriptural labyrinth begins with the Pharisees, self-righteously approaching Jesus and asking why his disciples did not wash their hands in the tradition of the elders. The Pharisees thought

they could walk straight into the center of the labyrinth by the shortest route because they were so righteous, strictly observing the law.

Jesus did not excuse or explain. Jesus challenged their right to question him. ‘Why do *you* substitute the traditions of the elders for the commandment of God?’ With this question, Jesus diverts the Pharisees, and all who were listening, onto a side path, a path that required much more thinking than we usually credit.

The issue for the Pharisees as laid out by Jesus was not simply one of tricky words. The tradition had ruled that if a child stated that whatever the parents would have received was now, *Korban*, dedicated to God, this was the same as an oath to God. Unlike a broken oath to a human for which there was a prescribed penance, there was no remedy for a broken oath to God. Thus the Pharisees and the tradition of the elders would be boxed into an impossible situation by such a rash oath. To allow a person to rescind such an oath would be disrespectful to God. To allow a person to dishonor parents would be to break a commandment and be disrespectful to God. There was no room for mercy in this dilemma, no room for admitting the sinful nature of each human being. Once sure of their righteous standing with God, these Pharisees are left puzzled in the first quadrant.

We enter the second quadrant of our labyrinth with Jesus talking with the disciples. Very uneasy by this encounter with the Pharisees, the disciples ask Jesus, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” Notice that no one thanks Jesus for sticking up for them, or congratulates him for confounding them.

There is an element of the fear of power here – both political and religious. The Pharisees were dedicated religious leaders. It was assumed that they understood the law better than anyone else, because they spent so much time considering it, debating it, working out the details. The disciples had seen Jesus do some amazing things. They had heard him preach remarkable teachings. They had also learned of the death of John the Baptist. They did not wish the same thing to happen to Jesus – or to

themselves. The disciples did not understand the details of the debate. They knew themselves to be learning. Was it such a bad thing to wash hands in a respectful way? They are following the Pharisees back to the entrance of the labyrinth.

Jesus turns them around. He tells the disciples to let the Pharisees be. In their anger, in their pride, in their certainty of their own understanding, these offended Pharisees cannot lead anyone toward God. So Peter asks Jesus to explain to them what he meant, what is the answer to the Pharisee's question, for to Peter the exchange between the Pharisees and Jesus has been as puzzling as one of Jesus' parables.

Jesus gives a simple explanation. These Pharisees are so busy concentrating on the particulars of following the rituals in their attempt to become closer to God, that they are missing the very relationship which God would desire them to have. Somehow they have observed Jesus and his disciples enough to know that Jesus did not require his disciples to wash their hands in the ritual way. Yet they do not seem to have noticed his miracles, his healings, his radical teachings, or his call to repentance. They are so worried about giving God respect according to their understanding of respect, that they have missed God's own commandments. Jesus reminds the disciples of God's commandments, echoing the ten commandments as he lists the defiling matters which come from the heart. What comes from the heart is what truly gives respect and honor to God.

While the disciples mull over these thoughts, Jesus leads them into the region of Tyre and Sidon, a Gentile region. As we journey with the disciples and Jesus, we enter the third quadrant of our Scriptural labyrinth. We, and the disciples, might think we are beginning to understand what Jesus is saying. In fact, we think that of course this is the way we have thought all along. We are getting close to God, we can feel it. Treat people nice, with respect and kindness – that is what we are called to do!

A Canaanite woman approaches. This is not too unusual. We are, after all, in her territory. What is unusual is that she speaks. A foreign, Gentile woman speaks to Jesus, a Jewish male. Ah, we

think, here is Jesus' chance to give these slow disciples a lesson. Surely he will speak, grant her request, and then smile at us and the disciples to say, this is how it is done.

However, he doesn't speak. He does not even acknowledge that she has spoken. The disciples get annoyed – with her and with Jesus. Just send her away!

We turn the corner of the path and find ourselves heading back to the first quadrant. What is happening? Jesus speaks rudely to the woman, dismissing her request because it comes from one who is not of the people to whom he has been sent. Hold on! This is not the Jesus whom we think we know. This Jesus does not fit our expectations, our understanding, our vision of him. We thought we had Jesus pegged and then he does this. We are almost back to the first quadrant when we realize that Jesus has stopped to talk further with the Canaanite woman. Was she offended, just like the Pharisees? Did she try to argue, to defend her position, as did the disciples. Did she present her credentials as we might have done, detailing her good life, her many friends and neighbors, her right to his assistance?

The Canaanite woman does none of these things. She simply declares that even the dogs eat the crumbs during the meal. She does not deny the priority of the people whom God has chosen to be witness to his righteousness and grace.

She does not claim to be deserve the healing. Rather she declares that even the smallest bits of the grace and mercy of God are sufficient for her needs.

Here is faith, Jesus shouts, great faith! The Canaanite woman's humility and trust have thrust her into the center of the labyrinth where she finds healing for her daughter. Jesus stays where he is, to walk alongside the disciples and us as we continue into the fourth quadrant of our Scriptural labyrinth.

The fourth quadrant turns the spotlight on us. How do we understand these things? We think we have left the Pharisees far behind, but have we? Like the Pharisees, most us could probably be fair in believing that we have avoided the biggest of the sins listed in the commandments – murder, adultery, theft. We have done a pretty good job, like the Pharisees, of washing our hands. Perhaps we

have done too good a job, for we have sometimes washed our hands of the very commandments we claim to obey. We seldom question the economic relationships which leave so much of the world in poverty, as long as we are allowed to maintain our standards of living which we are loathe to relinquish. We applaud, or at least tolerate, the slanderous comments made within our political systems – all parties - as being simply a byproduct of freedom of speech instead of speaking out ourselves. Like the disciples, we are too often worried about offending someone, and that someone is not usually Jesus. We stand content with our semi-regular attendance at church, our generous but not onerous gifts of charity, and our standards of behavior which are in tune with, or even slightly above, the rest of society. Like the disciples we sometimes look disdainfully upon those who are outside the privileged circle, supposing that they deserve less attention, fewer comforts, imagining that their illnesses, their misfortunes, are always their fault or just the way the world is. We approach God with a certain sense of entitlement, and expectation that God will give us what is our due.

The fourth quadrant of our Scriptural labyrinth is not intended to keep us at bay, or to destroy us. It is our equivalent of the forty years that Israel wandered in the desert, of the sojourn Joseph spent in Egypt so that the Israelites might find food in a time of famine. We wander in the fourth quadrant so that we can learn to trust God, to fully jettison all those things which might come between us and God – our pride, our self-sufficiency, our sense of entitlement, our sins. The fourth quadrant is for one last look at ourselves as God sees us – both with all our sins and as *beloved children*. At last, then, we will enter into the presence of God as did the Canaanite woman – humbly and with tremendous trust in the mercy of God for all.

And let us not forget that when we are in the center of the labyrinth, we are only halfway through our journey. It is tempting to step over the rock borders of the pathway to take a quick way out – filled with holy zeal to set the world right. However we still have much to learn on our way out. It was on my way out of the labyrinth in St. Louis that I noticed that some of the turns in the path were

made not by rocks, but by plants. Some of these plants were weeds allowed to grow up in the path, much like the obstacles we place to our spiritual growth through complacency and inattention. Others were delightful flowers, there to slow our pace, to remind us to appreciate God's creation. Through these I heard the lesson, that even though I had been to the center of the labyrinth, I still did not know everything there is to know about God.

In grace God has revealed much. In grace, God has kept much of God still a mystery, lest we become arrogant again. And always in grace, Jesus walks beside us in the ongoing labyrinth of life.