

A Long, Hard Journey To a Promised Land: On Not Trying Harder

Sermon Preached at Foundry United Methodist Church
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Exodus 18:13-24
John 7:14-24

All of us experience, in our life journeys, in-between places and in-between times ... times and places when we are no longer in Egypt but not yet to the Promise Land.

In in-between places and in-between times, the old rules no longer seem to apply but we don't know what the new rules are yet, old truths are no longer true but we really discovered the new truths yet; the way things used to work don't work anymore but we haven't discovered the new things that will work yet.

I am convinced that we as a nation are going through an in-between place right now. Ever since September 11, 2001, and maybe even before, we have not been quite sure what the rules of the world community are anymore, what truth is. The ways that we used to do things in the world don't seem to work the way they used to.

Our denominations, churches, our mainline churches are in an in-between place. The things we thought we used to know, we don't know anymore, but we aren't sure where we will be when we get to where ever it is we are going.

The great prototype, the great role model, for what it means to live in an in-between place and in an in-between time is Moses and the children of Israel as they traveled between Egypt and the Promise Land.

If the children of Israel had traveled in a straight line between Egypt and the Promise Land, they could have made across it in six months, maybe four. Instead it took them forty years, because they, like most of us in in-between places, were slow learners. God keeps us in in-between places for a reason. The in-between places of our lives are the most important places because they are the places where we grow the most.

So Moses is in an in-between place with the children of Israel. And I want us to observe a few things this morning about Moses in his in-between place and in-between time.

First of all, in an in-between place where what used to work for Moses isn't working anymore, where the way he did things back in Egypt isn't effective anymore, Moses does what most of do in in-between places. He kept doing what wasn't working anymore, only harder.

What we do in-between places is this: We keep doing what isn't working anymore, only harder and harder.

In our relationships when something stops working that used to work, what we tend to do is try harder and harder, and what usually happens is that things gets worse and worse. For example, I have this compulsive need to make Jane happy. It is how I got her to marry me, I think. So when I get home at the end of the day and Jane is obviously unhappy, my personal goal becomes to figure out how to fix whatever is wrong and make her happy. And when she puts me off, my reaction is to try even harder and harder to figure out what is wrong, and fix it, and make her happy. Finally, after a couple hours of my probing harder and harder and

getting nowhere, I'll say: "Jane, why don't you tell me what is wrong?" She will finally answer: "Well, I had a problem at work and that was what was wrong when I got home, but now what's wrong is that you won't leave me alone for half a minute."

In an in-between place our tendency is to try harder to do what isn't working and we only make things worse and worse. In our work when something isn't working the way we think it ought to work, our tendency is to stay an hour longer at our desk, to push our colleagues harder and harder, and the more tired we get and the harder we push our co-workers, the worse things get.

In our denominations, at this particular point in history when it feels as though things aren't working the way they used to work, our tendency is to try to control each other more and more. You will be reading, I'm afraid, in the Washington Post over the next couple of months about another church trial. How discouraging this is! Things aren't working the way they used to work and the way we try to fix it is by controlling each other more and more. And the more we try to control each other the more things don't work.

In our nation; the ultimate illustration of trying harder and harder is war. We can't get things in the international, the global, the world community to work the way they used to work, and the ultimate example of trying harder and harder is war.

It is what we all do in in-between places. Albert Einstein said that the definition of insanity is to keep doing what isn't working over and over again and expecting to get different results.

The second thing we can learn from Moses's experience is this: When we are in an in-between place or an in-between time - when we ourselves are in the thick of an in-between situation - it is almost impossible for us to see the problem. We have no perspective. We need someone else from outside the situation to help us get perspective and to help us get out of the compulsive rut that we have gotten ourselves into.

Moses needed his father-in-law Jethro. We all need someone from outside the situation we are stuck in to help us get some perspective. Moses' father in-law Jethro was from so far outside the situation that he was even a priest of another religion. He wasn't even an Israelite. He was a Median priest from outside the situation.

Jethro came and saw what Moses was doing and said, "Moses, you are going to kill yourself if you keep doing things harder and harder; you are going to destroy yourself and you are going to destroy these people, too."

Jethro was history's first consultant. He did exactly what consultants do. He came from outside the situation; he analyzed the situation; he helped Moses get perspective; he helped Moses re-engineer the system; and then he left.

Often those who are closest to us, our loved ones, our closest friends, can not help us in these situations, because they are stuck in the situation with us. So we need a consultant, a therapist, an aunt or uncle from Detroit -- we need to find someone from outside the situation who can help us get perspective.

Jethro told Moses what to do. (And the advice he gave Moses is almost always the solution when we are trying harder and harder in an in-between place and things are only getting worse and worse). Jethro told Moses to trust the community -- to let go of control and to trust the community.

Our United Methodist General Conference needs to let go of trying to control this eight-million member church and trust the communities within the church. General Conference needs to trust its congregations to work through this particular in-between place we are in right now.

I suspect what our nation need to do at this particular in-between point of history is to give up our trying harder and harder to control the world around us and to trust the world community to help us figure out how to get healed from the wounds and the pains of the terrorism that has become part of all of our lives together.

When we are in an in-between place and an in-between time, and when we are stuck and we are trying harder and harder thinking that if we just push a little harder, if we just work at this another hour, if we just give it more of ourselves, we are going to get this thing fixed, we need to surrender some of our control and learn to trust the community that God has given.

There is one more thing that I want to say this morning: When the early Christian church was trying to figure out what it was that Jesus had done to their lives, when they were trying to figure out how it was that Jesus who had died and had risen again had so impacted them, how he had changed and transformed their lives, the early Christians community was fascinated by this story of the in-between place and time between Egypt and the Promised Land.

The community that produced the gospel of John, especially, looked back to Moses and the children of Israel in the wilderness and found truth there that helped them understand their experience of Jesus Christ. The gospel of John says that Jesus is the manna, the bread from heaven that the children of Israel ate in the wilderness. It also suggests that Jesus is this experience of learning to let go of control, of letting go of the law - learning to stop trying harder and harder when things only get worse and worse, and trusting in God and in the community that God has given us.

They said that Jesus is the alternative to trying harder and harder when trying harder and harder isn't working anymore. They said that to accept Jesus is to trust in the grace of God and in the community of Christ. To accept Jesus as Savior and Lord means giving up sovereignty of our own lives when our lives under our own control aren't working anymore. The hardest thing that I think that we do in all of life is to give up solvency of our own lives.

If you wonder where Jesus is in our world and in our lives, this is where Jesus is - waiting for us at the in-between places where we can't do it by ourselves anymore, no matter how hard we try, waiting to for us to surrender the need to do it ourselves, to be in control, waiting for us to trust.