

When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people. Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua: “Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, and command them, ‘Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.’” Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. Joshua said to them, “Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the

Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.”

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Now that summer is here, one of my family’s favorite evening activities is going for walks around the neighborhood. I’m a fast walker, so we’ll often load the kids up into the double stroller and we’ll speed along at a brisk pace. Sometimes, however, we’ll leave the stroller at home and let the kids walk along with us. With two toddlers – Quintin now 3 and Eliza now almost 2, it always seems like this would be a good way to have them burn off some of their endless energy. But my idea of a family walk quickly changes when the kids set off walking themselves. They like to take their time, sometimes even sitting down in the midst of the walk, and I’ve discovered that kids don’t exactly walk in straight lines. We’ll be going along when suddenly they’ll see something interesting and veer off towards it. Ooh! A bug! Look – over there! It’s a flower! Or as my daughter says anytime she sees someone walking their dog - PUPPY! PUPPY! PUPPY!

It’s amazing to see the world through the eyes of young children. To them, a walk through the neighborhood is an entry into a magical realm. Even if we’re headed somewhere fun, like a park or playground, or to get ice cream – they care less about our destination, but are more fascinated by the stick or rock on the ground in front of them.

Somewhere along the way we lose this sense of wonder, of living in the moment, of groundedness. In our summer book *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor observes the dynamic of parents and kids walking together. Often, the parent will be in a hurry to get somewhere, and will pull the child

along by the hand – the child straining to soak in the world around them, but the parent guiding the child forward towards whatever destination is ahead. She writes that “if the adult is talking on a cell phone, then really, [the child] might be better off in jail.”

I’m guilty of this myself. There are certainly times when we need to get somewhere and I need to encourage my kids to move a bit quicker – whether we’re trying to get Quintin to preschool on time, walking through a busy parking lot, or crossing the street. However, I think we can learn a lot from the way young children walk through and observe the world around them. In our hurry to get places, we unintentionally train our children to focus more on the destination rather than the journey. We teach them to worry more about going from point A to B instead of being aware of the steps in between. I wonder what it might look like if we approached our lives instead with the attitude of a child – taking in each moment, one at a time.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests we can begin doing this through by using walking as a spiritual practice. Instead of taking a walk to get somewhere, or to exercise, or achieve some other purpose, what if we just occasionally walked just for the sake of walking? To notice the rhythm and movement of our feet as they touch the ground, to breathe in the air and notice the sights and sounds around us, perhaps even walking barefoot or simply walking in a circle. In her words, “to detach walking from the destination is in fact one of the best ways to recognize the altars you are passing right by all the time. Most of us spend so much time thinking about where we have been or where we are supposed to be going that we have a hard time recognizing where we actually are.”

In today’s scripture reading we encounter the Israelites in a period of transition. They have been wandering throughout the Sinai desert for the past 40 years, and at long last they’ve arrived at the edge of the promised land. To

enter this land, the final step of their journey is crossing the Jordan river. In a story that harkens back to images of Moses parting the Red Sea, God tells the Israelite leader Joshua to send the priests to the river carrying the ark of the covenant. When the priests carry the ark into the river, the water parts on either side. They carry the ark to the middle of the river where they stand holding back the waters as the Israelites walk across the river crossing over into the promised land.

Now I don't know about you, but I'm pretty sure if I had just been walking in the desert for 40 years and finally reached my home – I would be *running* across that river as fast as I possibly could – and I wouldn't look back! The amount of relief, of joy, of fulfillment on behalf of the Israelites must have been incredible. But God had a different idea. Instead of the priests immediately following the people out of the river with the ark and rushing into the promised land, God told Joshua to pause and wait. God instructed him to send 12 men *back* into the river. They were to each take a stone out of the river, and carry them to the shore where they would be placed as a memorial of this moment. God want them to remember this walk across the river and to notice God's presence in this moment.

In our own lives, it's so easy to rush to the next destination. To the next meeting. To the next sports practices. To the next errand. As I've talk with families in this community – hardly anyone feels like they have enough time – *everyone* is busy. Yet in the midst of our busyness, I wonder if this story might help us approach life a bit differently. If you were to take a moment each day to stop and pause – where in your life would you pick up a stone to remember that moment? In your walk of faith where has God been present? How can you be more attentive to God walking alongside you in the ordinary moments of each day? It doesn't have to be complicated – we can begin by simply be taking a walk.

For the past few years in August we've taken groups of our 7-8<sup>th</sup> graders down to Chicago on what we call our "Middle School Mission Trip." We work with our church's mission partners in the city to learn about the issues in Chicago, volunteer our time, and just open our eyes to the diversity of life and living that exists in the city. Two summers ago we went one evening to The Night Ministry – a non-profit that focuses on homelessness and poverty in Chicago. A big part of their mission is to serve the over 10,000 youth who experience homelessness in Chicago each year.

That evening, we took part in a program they call their "night walk." A Night Ministry staff member gave us an orientation to their organization and the evening, and we were then split into smaller groups to spend an hour walking around the Lakeview neighborhood – the area with the largest concentration of homeless youth in Chicago. Each group was given a list of things to notice if we were in the shoes of a homeless teen – where would we get water? Where would we use the restroom? Where would we go at night? It was a startling contrast to be walking right by Wrigley Field and all of the bars and restaurants in that area, yet thinking about being a teenager without a home in the very same area. It was an area that many of us had walked through before perhaps heading to a Cubs game or going to a restaurant without even noticing these things. By taking the time to open ourselves to our surroundings and the moment, this walk became very different.

When we returned and debriefed our walk, we learned a lot more about the issues of homelessness for youth in Chicago. Sadly, a disproportionate number of homeless young people are part of the LGBT community – youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. So many are homeless because of family conflict – they've been kicked out of their homes, feel unsafe or unwelcomed, or have faced threats from family members. Some face discrimination and are unable to find jobs or safe places to stay.

For me, this was eye-opening because these kids who are living on the streets of Chicago could be some of our own kids here. Throughout my years in youth ministry, I've seen how difficult the struggle is for kids who wrestle with their gender or sexual identity. I've had kids sit down in my office and share they're gay, lesbian, or transgender. I've seen kids come out to their families. I can't imagine what it must feel like to be unsure whether or not your family will accept you, whether or not your friends will accept you, or whether or not your church will accept you. It's not easy even for kids who have incredibly supportive families – I can't imagine how it must be for those who don't experience their families as places of support.

This past week with the events in Orlando, we've become all too aware of the hate that exists towards people in the LGBT community. The 49 people who were killed were in a place that was supposed to be a refuge – a safe place where they could be themselves. Instead, it was turned into the opposite as our country experienced yet another tragic shooting.

Of course, there will be lots of debate on issues surrounding this event – and there are a lot of different views on LGBT issues, gun control, terrorism, and mental illness – even here in our own congregation. And those questions aren't totally unrelated to our faith, either – it's important for all of us to discern how God is speaking to us on each of these issues. This morning, however, I wonder how we might instead think about this question: how do we walk faithfully alongside one another in this moment?

Jesus spent a lot of time walking as he traveled the countryside in his ministry, and he invited many people to join him. Yet Jesus did not discriminate – he invited everyone to walk with him – tax collectors, prostitutes, roman soldiers, wealthy merchants, foreigners, Jews, people of other religions, men, women, and children. Some of these people were considered outcasts in their society, some of them were part of the “in-crowd”

– yet Jesus walked alongside all of them regardless of their social standing. All of us are also invited on this walk of faith. But it's about so much more than just our own individual walks. Jesus calls us to walk alongside one another – both those we are comfortable walking with – and especially those we disagree with. God's grace is bigger than any boundary we create between people – and we are called to live out that limitless grace by loving others as we love ourselves.

So as faithful Christians walking the way of Jesus – may our message to those in Orlando be this: we walk with you. To those in the LGBT community especially those young people who struggle to find places of welcome and safety: we walk with you. To those facing discrimination or racism: we walk with you. To those who wrestle with mental illness: we walk with you. To those who are unsure how to deal with these issues or people who are different: we walk with you. To those who feel no other option than to resort to violence and hate: we walk with you, too.

Our destinations in life aren't always known. Our destination as a country isn't always clear. It can be tempting to rush to the other side of the river leaving our fellow travelers behind. But let's not forget that we are in this moment together and we are rooted and grounded in love. Whoever our neighbors on either side of us might be, may we remember to pause, to take a moment to notice God's incredible creation around us. To see the image of God in each person and remember that we do not walk alone. We walk together. And most importantly, God is right there beside each and every one of us – reaching out with love and grace saying: I walk with you. Amen.