

Belonging to the Flock@**John 10:1-10****May 11, 2014****Rev. Sharlyn Gates**

This past week I was blessed to attend two different events that were both very meaningful to me, and in fact gave me a reminder of that early call to serve our Lord Jesus Christ in whatever way He led me.

The first event was a banquet. It was a great feast with good food around the table with very nice people, and that in itself is always a blessing! But there was so much more! You see, I was invited to go to this banquet by the Muenzers. It was a Young Life Banquet and many of you are aware that Anderson and Allie and now Ben are very involved in Young Life.

I confess that I knew very little about Young Life. I knew it was a program that reached out to youth and that it was something that some of our youth found very meaningful. A good reason in itself for their pastor to attend.

What I didn't know is that it was started – years ago – by a Presbyterian Youth Pastor in Texas and it has grown over the years to be such an effective tool for ministry to youth. What I saw and heard there was young people – teenagers – who greeted us with enthusiasm and excitement as we entered the doors. What a welcome it was!

I heard testimonies from these young people about how their lives had been changed and how they heard the greatest message of all time – that God is crazy about them, loving them no matter what, knowing them – crazy in love with each one of them.

And then I heard adults who talked about things that reminded me so much of my seminary classes on youth ministry – and my work with youth and their leaders as the director of the youth movement – Chrysalis. That young people are dying to know they are loved. That we need to be courageous enough to enter their world – a culture that oftentimes speaks a different language and that wears different clothes and acts kind of goofy, but who are longing to know they are loved and cared about and accepted and who have a very hard time believing it.

These adult leaders have gone out from their safe places where they are comfortable – their own world of grown up seriousness and places of judgment – and they have entered bravely into the mission field of teens, learning the language, coming to know the culture. And I heard them say with deep passion and authentic love that their lives have been changed as well.

Some of them get up really early to pick up teens and take them for a special breakfast before class and before their own jobs start – one morning every single week! They put aside their own comfort to step out for these young ones who are hungry for more than breakfast – they are hungry, some are starving to hear the Good News of the Gospel –

that God, out of His crazy love for them, sent his Son to die on a cross and to be raised from the dead so they can have assurance that they belong. Belonging is so important.

These adults see youth ministry – not in denominational terms or “let’s grow the church youth group” terms – but as a mission field, as an important, urgent call to reach out in love to young people. Nothing else. No other motive. Trusting Jesus to lead them as they go in and out.

The other event I attended this week was while on study leave at St. Francis Retreat Center in Dewitt. The seminar I attended was called “Faithwalking.” It was a short version of a longer, more intent process that I plan to continue. It was led by Jim Herrington and Trisha Taylor, coauthors along with R. Robert Creech of the book “*The Leaders Journey ... Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation.*” (A Leadership Network Publication, ©2003)

The focus of this seminar was about spiritual formation and transformation. It was about the urgent need to do something different – something we don’t really know about in this day of shifting paradigms. The leaders talked about the decline in the Church and how we live in this fear and uncertainty and how we can busy ourselves into a frenzy trying to figure out what to do to grow the church. I don’t know about you but I feel that fairly often – that anxiety and crazy busyness – yet often feel we are spinning our wheels and not getting too far.

But the focus of this seminar was about stepping back from the busyness – going back to the basics of what our faith calls us to be and do – that is to be like the one we follow. As Christians, that is Jesus. It is about being his disciples. But what does that really mean?

They gave us – actually for me, it is a reminder again – a mental model of discipleship:

It is living a reflective life – truly living as the branches that are attached to the vine. Always thinking about Jesus as our leader, our teacher, our friend and of course, our Savior. It is taking time for study, for reading, for listening and then thinking about what it all means. Spending lots of time in prayer talking to the only one who really knows everything. It is about realizing that – especially today – there is a lot we don’t know, but trusting that God, the Creator, has a plan – a new plan. Not a plan that looks like 50 years ago but a new plan for today and for the future.

God says in Jeremiah 29: “I know the plans I have for you, ... plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

When we live a reflective life that is close to the vine that is Jesus we lose the anxiety, we realize a peace that comes with trusting Him with everything – our lives, our families, our work and even our Church.

So the first part of the model of discipleship is to live a reflective life.

Another part of the model is to live in radical obedience to God. That sounds kind of scary and difficult, doesn't it? But the thing is, if we are not living in complete obedience we are not living the fully human life that we were created by the Creator to live.

We were created to be stewards of the world that God created. That's our job description. We have to discern what that means for each of us in our lives and then live it. But it doesn't just mean giving a portion of our money to the church. While that is one important part of being a steward – it is just one very small part.

How do we be stewards in the life we live? I would say each of us have different roles. We all work in different areas, live in different communities, we have relationships with various people, our church is in a specific neighborhood that is different from other churches' neighborhoods.

Could it be that God had a plan for us to be in those specific places and relationships in order for us – for you and for me, and for us together as community – to be stewards of those particular places and lives in this particular time? Doing our best to create a peaceful, better atmosphere, a place where the radical hospitality of God is shining through? Could it be that we are called to get out of this building and do something in this neighborhood where our church has been for all these years? Could it be that the life of a disciple is a calling to go out to others more than it is to bring others in here?

The second part of the model of discipleship is radical obedience that leads to a "missional life" – a life of going out to others – of taking the Good News of the Crazy love of God shown to us in Jesus Christ out to a world of people who are hungry for that Word to be told and to be authentically acted out in all we do.

The last part of the model for discipleship is to be a part of an authentic community that believes in and practices these spiritual disciplines – to live a reflective life that shapes us – that *transforms* us more and more into the image of God as we were created to be; and to live that life in radical obedience to God. That does not mean living Jesus' life as he was 2,000 years ago, but it means living our life in a way that we think Jesus might live it if he were us today.

In the book "Untamed" ... Reactivating a missional form of discipleship" written by Alan and Debra Hirsch they end with this:

"Soren Kierkegaard tells a story, almost a parable of sorts about the geese who used to make their home on his childhood Danish farm. Each spring he would watch as a new gaggle of goslings hatched and grow. And over the course of their short lives, these

geese would gorge themselves at constantly refilled troughs of grain until they were so fat they could hardly walk, let alone waddle.

He imagined they felt their lives were perfect as every need they had was catered in abundance.

When autumn came, the truth became apparent. The wild geese that had spent the warm summer months in Denmark would gather in preparation for their southerly migration. They would circle the skies above the farms, calling out to any stragglers to join in their flight.

At this point, the farmed geese would lift their heads from the feeding troughs and looking into the skies at their untamed cousins.

And you know, listening to the call of the wild, they would become animated, running as best they could around their enclosures emulating flight. Of course, their gluttonous diet and life of luxury meant they were far too heavy to become airborne, and they probably didn't really want to join their untamed cousins on such a perilous journey – but their instincts drove them to emulate flight on the ground. The wild geese would fly off and the fattened, domesticated geese would simply return to their barnyard existence, ignorant of the farmer's grim ultimate purpose – they were destined for the dinner table.

Kierkegaard's parable goes on to tell of a wild goose who looked with dismay at his domesticated cousins. In the interest of food and relative luxury, they had given up flight for the mediocrity of the barnyard. With splendid motivation, he decided to spend some time w/ them in order to help each awaken to their true calling and join the others in wild flight. Sadly, he lived there until he himself was tamed. Every year, when the wild geese would honk in flight overhead, he like the others would flutter his wings, rise a bit and resolve to join them. But he never did. Instead he became content to remain w/ the tamed and flightless – destined for the table.

Kierkegaard ends his parable w/ a warning: while a wild goose can be tamed, seldom does a tame goose become wild again.

As disciples of Christ, we're called to an untamed existence. Like the wild geese we are meant to live wild and dangerous lives, flying above the heads of our own generation, calling them to the authenticity of what they were created to do. Instead, we have allowed ourselves to be dulled into a life of mediocrity, where the only wild journeys we ever take are in our dreams." (253 – 254)

We live in a community – the Church – where we help one another learn and grow; where we support each other and give care; where we have great opportunities to worship together. We share the food that Christ gives us to be nurtured so that we can

go out from here and live missional lives – that is taking Christ’s love and care to others; that is being the stewards of the world that God created us to be.

We share food and fellowship, which is such a blessing. But are we too comfortable to get up and fly? Are we satisfied with mediocrity?

Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd. My sheep hear my voice and they know my voice and they follow me.” A good shepherd would not let the sheep stay in the sheep pen, getting no exercise, finding no real food for energy. No, the good shepherd leads his flock out to the pastures, and in the summer when the grass is gone he leads them up into the mountains and the rough, craggly dangerous places to find new grass and new pastures.

Jesus also said “I am the gate.” There was usually no physical gate or door on a sheep pen. The shepherd actually would lay down at the entryway, becoming the gate, making sure his sheep did not go out without him, and that nothing would come in unless he allowed.

We are a part of Jesus’ flock. The good news is that we belong to his flock and that means we can completely trust him to lead us out the gate and into unknown pastures without anxiety or fear about where we are going or how it is going to look when we get there.

Our job is to be the sheep. To obediently follow the shepherd who is completely trustworthy. We are called to be authentic disciples. To be stewards. To be missionaries to those who are hungering and thirsting for the Good News – that God is crazy about them. That God’s love was radical as he sent us a Savior to die on the cross for us.

If you haven’t heard that before, believe the Good News! That love of God is for you! God loves you with a passion you cannot ever measure. You belong to him and to his flock. You cannot go wrong by following his Son, Jesus. He will never lead you astray.

My prayer is that we might begin to pray about and spend that reflective time alone and together listening ... listening. Not judging, not coming to conclusions, not deciding whether we agree or not. Just listening for a Word from God ... who created a whole universe just by speaking a Word. Amen.