

“The Field Trip Begins”

Based on Brian McLaren *“We Make the Road by Walking”*

Chapter 25: “Jesus, Violence and Power”

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Texts: Isaiah 42: 1-9; Matthew 16: 13-17-9

Today we begin a new series in worship, Bible study and discussion group. It is based on the book *“We Make the Road by Walking”* By Brian McLaren. We will begin not at the beginning of the book, but in the middle, in Chapter 25, *“Jesus, Violence and Power”*. Today, I’ll reflect on this chapter and then our other groups, Thursday at 11 a.m. or Thursday at 7 p.m. will discuss it later this week. This whole section of McLaren’s book is called, *“Alive in the Adventure of Jesus”* and is about travelling. McLaren opens this section of the book by saying, *“To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to have a desire, a dream, a hope for the future. It is to translate that hope for the future into action in the present and to keep acting in the light of it, no matter the disappointments, no matter the setbacks and delays.”* He also shares with us in Chapter 14 that *“desires, hopes and dreams inspire action, that’s what makes them different from a wish. Wishing is a substitute for action. Wishing creates a kind of passive optimism that can paralyze people in a happy fog of complacency: ‘Everything will turn out fine.*

Why work, struggle, sacrifice or plan?' Guess what happens to people who never work, struggle, sacrifice, or plan? Things don't normally turn out the way they wish!"

So, we're embarking on an adventure, for at least the next sixteen weeks. To go on an adventure, we're going to need to take things with us. I have my backpack here for the journey...now what shall we put in it? (This will be free form on live stream) Our Bible, our questions, our minds, our ears, our eyes, a copy of McLaren's book, our heart, and our voice. Okay, let's pack all those things in and get started on our journey.

McLaren begins this chapter talking about Jesus "taking his disciples on a field trip." You know, it is kind of hard to learn amidst normalcy. We get complacent, and often are not challenged when things are comfortable, and everything is in its place. Instead, just like we learned in school, we need to leave campus, go see what the world has to offer, and learn from it. Teachers know well that students need hands-on, first-person experience of things, especially things of nature, so they take them to museums, parks, nature centers, planetariums, and the like. Jesus, however, took his disciples about 25 miles from

their base in Galilee to a city called Caesarea Philippi, “a regional center of the Roman empire.”

McLaren goes into a grand description of Caesarea Philippi, including letting us know “the city was built beside a dramatic escarpment or cliff face. A spring, located there, was known as Pnias, “because it was the center for worship of the Canaanite god Baal.” If you know the Old Testament, you know that Baal was the god that the Israelites (and their God) often railed against. Put in simple terms, worshipping Baal was about the worst thing an ancient Israelite could do. If you’re interested, there are many books and studies about this. The point is that this spring was first used to worship a pagan god, Baal, and then later for the Greek god, Pan. It was also at Pnias that Alexander the Great and his armies took the whole region for the Greek empire.

Then came the Romans, and with them Herod the Great and his son, Herod Philip, who changed the name to Caesarea Philippi. It was named “to honor Caesar Augustus.” Now why does all this history matter, other than Pastor Greg finds it interesting? Well, for me, it is a place of conflict for people on both religious and national grounds. Jesus has a knack for taking people to places of pain, suffering, loss, conquest and hurt and transforming those places, both

within us and in the world around us. For McLaren, he calls the place “Caesar-ville” and says:

Imagine what it would be like to enter Caesar-ville with Jesus and his team. Today, we might imagine a Jewish leader bringing his followers to Auschwitz, a Japanese leader to Hiroshima, a Native American leader to Wounded Knee, or a Palestinian leader to the wall of separation. There, in the presence of all these terrible associations, Jesus asks his disciples a carefully crafted question: ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’

All along our journey, I hope you will find places where it’s necessary for you to stop, ponder and wonder at what is happening here. For me, this happened after reading the paragraph I just shared with you. I’ve studied this scripture in Matthew, especially the Transfiguration, many times. Either I missed it, or no one mentioned the location of Jesus’ interaction with the disciples in such a place. I thought the place itself was just a place. I guess I should have known that Jesus never does anything by accident. And yet, I thought the place benign. It was kind of irrelevant. And now today, I’m left imagining the disciples, in that place, being asked, “Who do you say that I am?” Is this Jesus Baal, Pan, Caesar? Is this Jesus the same as them, less than them, more than them, maybe equal? It is incredibly significant that Jesus would take this place and transform it. But I know the same thing happened on the burning trash heap of Golgotha, the place of Jesus’ crucifixion, which was also transformed.

According to McLaren, when Peter declares that Jesus is the “Christ, the Son of the living God” he is making much more than a theological claim. It is also a political statement for *Christ* is the Greek translation for the Hebrew term *Messiah*, which means “the one anointed as liberating king.” Not just anointed but anointed as a liberating king. Peter makes this declaration in a city named for Caesar. Jesus was to liberate the people from Caesar, and Peter announced it in a most dangerous place. “The Greek and Roman gods in their little niches on the cliff face may be called on to support the dominating rule of the Caesars. But the true and living God stands behind the liberating authority of Jesus.” For now, Peter “gets it”.

But it won’t be long before Peter’s journey takes a dramatic turn. From getting it to completely misunderstanding what Jesus is here to do, Peter gets, what McLaren calls, “conceptual whiplash.” Does this happen with you? In some ways, I hope it does. To really “get it”, we must be challenged by our accepted notions of who Jesus is and what he did and is doing. Most Christians are never challenged in their beliefs. We often accept and stay with what we learned as children, which we all know is not the whole story. We tend to leave out the violent or disruptive parts...as well we should with young children, perhaps...but we never get around to the cost of discipleship, we often just stay with the joy.

“What a Friend We Have in Jesus” can be a great hymn, but if we never get around to discussing the edict to murder the first born, or when Jesus almost gets thrown off a cliff in his own hometown, or when he’s tried, or even to his betrayal, then we have missed much of what discipleship in this Jesus’ name really means. What I’m saying is that the Way of Jesus Christ has been watered down by many well-meaning people. But in Jesus’ day, as well as our own, the more you are on the side of the disadvantaged, downtrodden, dispossessed, and disenfranchised, the more you will have a difficult life. McLaren says it this way, “Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet, great as they were, differed from Jesus in one important way: they both engaged in violence in God’s name. But in God’s name Jesus [and his followers, I might add] will undergo violence, and in so doing, he [they] will overcome it.” Even coming down the mountain after the Transfiguration, Jesus names again what will happen.

A field trip is used to “dislodge [children] from conventional thinking. By taking them to a new place, the teacher can help them see from a new vantage point, a new perspective.” My hope that our field trip with Jesus will lead us to new vantage points and give us new perspectives. But the call is for us to be open to it. We don’t even realize all the things we just accept about our faith without ever questioning them. No one did anything deliberately to mislead us, I believe,

but I know that even now, after 18 years of Sunday school, confirmation, four years at university and four more years at seminary, and twenty-five years in ordained ministry, and a whole lifetime in the church, I need a new vantage point from time-to-time. I need to be challenged in my beliefs, but also my way of being Christian. What does it mean to follow this Jesus, this Christ, into a future that you and I will only know by walking the path.

I want to close with a poem from Rainer Maria Rilke that I first read in a new book I've started by Bill Plotkin called *"The Journey of Soul Initiation: A Field Guide for Visionaries, Evolutionaries, and Revolutionaries"*:

*God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.*

There are the words we dimly hear:

*You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.*

Embody me.

*Flare us like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.*

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.

Just keep going. No feeling is final.

Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is a country they call life.

You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

Let us take one another's hand and begin the journey. Let us see what God has in store for us. I'll leave you with one final direction that McLaren suggests for us: Look for situations this week when your initial reaction should be questioned, especially in relation to power dynamics. In silence, listen for ways your thinking is out of sync with God's ways.

Blessings on the journey ahead. You are not travelling alone. Amen.