

Getting Back on Track

I was recently invited to review the manuscript of a new book on the ex-gay movement. In the process of reading, one theme that really stood out for me was our difficulty in accepting the unconditional love of God. The writer commented on how every time he challenged the ex-gay movement's leaders about the unconditional love, they always feel a need to put a "but" after it. God's love is unconditional but. It's not only ex-gay leaders that do this, too often in our own lives we bring God's love down to our own finite understanding. "The only 'but' in God's unconditional love is your butt."

God loves. And God asks that we love also. We need to let go of our limitation clauses and get back on track.

In case you have this idea that everything was hunky-dory once Jesus and his merry band set out on their mission, our gospel reading (Mark 10:35-45) reveals to us that things were far from so. Politics and power struggles existed amongst Jesus' closest. Naturally so, for these were not people who isolated themselves from society (like some of the sects) these were the socialists of the day, spending their time among the poor, the outcast, the disenfranchised. They saw the need for change and dreamed of a government of equity and justice led by Jesus. The account in Mark 10 occurs just before the famous "entry into Jerusalem" that we celebrate on Palm Sunday, and it becomes obvious that despite all of Jesus' teaching even the closest of disciples (James & John) were expecting a physical reign of Jesus – a socialist coup. Indeed, part of the reasons given for the arrest of Jesus, was to squash a perceived uprising.

Reading the gospels, we get a sense that among the twelve disciples there was a core group – Peter, James & John. James & John approach Jesus and demand leadership roles in his new government. [Matthew's record (20:21-28) suggests that they were goaded by their mother]

Boy, did they have it wrong! Even with Jesus' explanation they couldn't see it. They were sure that this was the right way to go, even though it began arguments within the disciple band.

And what about Jesus? So close to the culmination of his mission and purpose, yet the very people he needed were fighting among themselves. If it was me I'd be thinking "What a mistake I made – if I can't even trust *my* choice of disciples, how can I be sure that I have it right for the future?"

But this happens all the time. The reason we have so many different churches and denominations is because somewhere in the pursuance of mission, people got distracted – instead of focusing on "the calling" they became sidetracked with personal differences and politics, and before you know it the disciples are divided.

Of course, I'm not telling you anything you don't know.

It happens in our personal lives. We start a new job, a new relationship, life in a new home, with great vision and enthusiasm. In our minds we have the perfect future opening us before us, but

somewhere along the way we became distracted and the perfect job is miserable, the dream love affair now struggles to communicate – and we're left thinking where did we go wrong?

Life is rarely about right and wrong, life is about choices; often choices that we make with the best intention, often choices that are fully informed. Especially if we're of Evangelical Christian breeding we're obsessed with the will of God. Every chapter of life, every major decision has to be in the will of God. Even though we're not the most perceptive judges of God's will it's so important to get God's will right.

Of course, it's God's will that we have free choice, that we make decisions – and regardless of what decision we make being able to find God in it. But if it turns out to be a bad choice then we punish ourselves for “not being in God's will”. Who says it wasn't God's will just because we didn't have everything our way – what about the big picture, the learning opportunities that came from this experience; other people that may have been helped.

We need to escape from the mindset that if it's good then it is God's will, but if it's difficult it isn't. This is not how God works.

God loves – whether we're having a good time or a bad time. If you believe in angels, (which you should think about), God's angels are there in the good, the bad, and the in between.

we often get off track because we allow our focus to shift from the well being of others to the survival of the institution and our own position and image.

Many years ago a married couple (friends of mine) named their children from their daily Bible reading on the day of the new baby's birth. It worked for a while – Amos, Luke, Eunice but then came a birth and a reading that threw them into panic. The reading was 1 Samuel 4. It concerned the daughter-in-law of Eli the high priest, after Eli's tragic death. She was in labour and about to die herself in childbirth, and as the child was born she named him Ichabod – because the glory of God has left this place. “How can we name our child Ichabod” my friends cried, “Is God trying to show us something?” Well, yes – God was showing them that they had a choice – they didn't have to stick to the same old way of name choosing.

God's will is not written in stone (as in the ten commandments) or in blood (as in the death of Jesus), God's will is written in love.

So if your relationship is all messed up you have a choice. If you love each other go to see a therapist (together) and try to renew it; but if not give each other permission to move on.

If your dream job has become a nightmare, talk to someone who can help resolve the situation - if it's caused by work related circumstances talk to a senior manager – if its caused by you, talk with someone who can give you wise counsel. Leaving or staying could both be right. Remember however, if it's God's will you're seeking then it won't be all about you.

And what about church? How do we get back on track? For me, it feels like we've been sitting in the station waiting for people to board the train. Some of you may even feel we've been shunted

into a siding or even have been derailed. And we can spend forever analyzing how we got there; when really we need to get back on track.

We need to focus on why God called MCC London into being and to grasp the mission.

Our statement of purpose:

*We are committed to building supportive and caring community;
to nurturing spiritual growth and leadership;
to reaching out in service locally and globally;
to celebrating meaningful and vibrant worship.*

Like the disciples, we need to refocus ourselves on those who need the message and the community we serve. We need to stop setting conditions and in love reach out to whoever needs us. Learning and growing is part of discipleship not part of recruitment.

What do think Jesus did when faced by this audacious request from James and John – roll his eyes, thinking “Here we go again”.

No! Jesus says “You don’t know what you’re asking.” To which they replied “we do!” He continued that they could share his suffering (which they didn’t grasp) but it wasn’t his place to give out positions.

Then you could say “all hell broke loose” as the disciples became angry and argued with each other. Eventually, Jesus called them to him and spoke to them, saying “Stop trying to imitate the power structures of others – that is not how it works here. Whoever wishes to be great must first be the servant.” Why a servant? Because a servant or a server focuses on people; a servant/server doesn’t work from a place of power but from a place of willingness, knowing that with a job done well the tips will be good.

Getting back on track comes with abundant tips – maybe not in silver and gold, but in great blessings, peace of mind and appreciation.

This train is leaving the station. There’ll be stops along the way that people can get on board. Get on board!