

Visions from the Grand Canyon: An Audacious Faith
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
18 September 2005
Text: Matthew 15:21-28

Those of you who worshiped here last Sunday know that today's sermon is part two of a series of sermons inspired by the summer's adventure of hiking to the bottom of the Grand Canyon—and back out again. Several of you have suggested oh-so-tactfully that perhaps ONE sermon was sufficient, to avoid the “gather ‘round while we show our vacation slides” syndrome. I want to counter that fear with the words of John Wesley Powell who led the first documented expedition to travel completely through the Canyon by boat in 1869 and returned many times with the US Geological Survey to map its magnitude.

*A year scarcely suffices to see it all. [maybe three weeks isn't so bad after all!] It has infinite variety, and no part is ever duplicated. Its colors, though many and complex in any instant, change with the ascending and declining sun....You cannot see the Grand Canyon in one view, as if it were a changeless spectacle from which a curtain might be lifted, but to see it you have to toil...through its labyrinths. It is a region more difficult to traverse than the Alps or the Himalayas, but if strength and courage are sufficient, a concept of sublimity can be obtained never again to be equaled this side of Paradise. [from John Wesley Powell, *Canyons of the Colorado*, quoted in a website www.songbird.com/gc/powell]*

Well. Interestingly, John Wesley Powell never traversed either the Alps or the Himalayas, but he is to be forgiven his hyperbole. The visions before your eyes whether looking up, or down or across, evoke unparalleled awe and wonder and praise to the Creator. They are breathtaking—and I mean that literally as well as metaphorically! I was surprised to learn that the Grand Canyon is not the widest, not the deepest, not the longest on earth: it is deemed one of the seven natural wonders of the world because all three dimensions together

are phenomenal. What may be seen *in* the canyon, however, is spectacular in a different way. On the trail, the panoramic vistas give way to scenes of the rock face up close and personal. The multi-colored, exotically-named layers of Coconino sandstone, Redwall limestone, Bright Angel shale, and Zoroaster granite, offer silent witness to the canyon's history, and the major geological events that formed it. Though "only" 4 million years were required to carve the canyon to its awesome dimensions, volcanic action before that set the stage for such action. This rock I picked up at the bottom is 1.7 billion years old. *Almost* timeless, stable, seemingly immovable. Because the forces of nature work on their own timeline, it's easy to forget that the history of the canyon is a history of change.

Churches, like canyons, are built upon rock, with layers and layers of tradition, history, experience. These layers give a church its unique color, shape its vision, and determine to some extent the trails that may be developed to descend its depths. As with canyons, however, the apparent permanence of its rock walls may disguise the reality that its history too is marked by change.

...and so it has been, from the beginning. The morning gospel reading is an intriguing narrative from the middle of Jesus' earthly ministry. His work up to this point had largely been located in the villages and countryside of Galilee, among his Jewish kinsmen. He is depicted in this text as understanding his mission to be directed exclusively toward them. And then one day the serenity of certainty is upset by a Gentile women's noisy interruption. Listen for God's Word to the Church in the reading—found on p. 17 of the chapel/pew Bibles—from the gospel according to Matthew, in the 15th chapter at the 21st verse [15:21-28].

We've never done it that way before. Someone has called them the seven last words of the church. That's truly accurate, if the need for stability and continuity trumps experimentation and risk every time. But it is a common vulnerability, shared even

by our Lord, at least as far as this text is concerned. When first confronted by a Canaanite woman—clearly outside the family of faith—Jesus appeals to the confines of his mission as he saw it: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Undeterred, she refuses to go away quietly and kneels before Jesus with a plea for his help. Much has been made of Jesus’ dismissive and insulting metaphor defining the boundaries of his ministry: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Some biblical commentators suggest it was meant on the order of priority—first feed the children, then the pets. But given the context and the social and religious risks the Gentile woman took to address this Jewish teacher publicly, even this softened interpretation hardly seems welcoming.

The Canaanite woman’s request brings the question of the scope of Jesus’ mission to the forefront. Her courageous challenge to his initial observation may well have provided a defining moment in his own self-understanding. The woman’s clever subversion of his children/dog metaphor: “yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table”---enlarged Jesus’ vision of his mission. From here on the gospels move beyond a limited perspective of “messiah” for the lost sheep of Israel alone, and instead embrace a broader, more inclusive one which would come to mean “Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female” [Galatians 3:28].

Now, the woman’s motivation was not about expanding Jesus’ mission. She came to him as a mother seeking help for her ill daughter. In the face of need, she “thought outside the box,” and came up with a different solution. It resulted in her daughter’s healing, though not without difficulty and at least initially, rejection and insult. I think of her faith which Jesus called “great” as audacious—bold and daring, creative and resilient.

Today we have ordained and installed leaders who will help us accomplish Christ’s mission. They have been called to this task in a time of tremendous need, when the storms of war,

natural disaster and economic flux have produced great disease and profound insecurity. We are a church in change as well, in response to the changing context of ministry in a post-modern, highly secular culture. At times leaders and members alike find ourselves anxious and concerned about the direction we are moving.

May God grant our elders, deacons, and trustees audacious faith that does not retreat from new world realities in favor of old world solutions. May God grant them a spirit of daring to pursue the path blazed by our rich heritage—both that of our Christian tradition and our congregation’s history—while being open to new ways of being church and doing church in these fearful, unsettling times. What challenges await us! How can we reverse the 30-year decline in membership, for example? How does our mission need to expand and enlarge? How can we be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ while attracting people to this community of faith?

The Grand Canyon offers a vision of how to keep both—tradition and innovation—in balance. The wide panoramic vistas at the rim provide a spectacular view that is enlarged and enhanced by the scenes one encounters along the trail. The changing rock layers, the crevice waterfalls you come suddenly upon, the unique canyon ecosystem which on first impression looks like arid desert, but actually supports a wealth of flora and fauna. As we hiked we noticed the abundant foliage and delicate wildflowers appearing to grow directly out of the canyon’s rocky interior walls. Unable to contain her amazement, Carol exclaimed, “The *audacity* of these plants to think they can grow and thrive in rock!”

....but they do.

And so can we, my friends. For living securely in an insecure world we need both the macro-perspective: a compelling vision of God’s Kingdom in which justice and peace are the rule; and the micro-perspective: a supportive community in which we are rooted and grounded in love and invited to grow.

An audacious faith of courage and compassion. Without both, we run the risk of irrelevancy or the judgment made of one pious saint, “He was so heavenly-minded, he was no earthly good.”

An audacious faith trains its vision on nothing less than God’s rule on earth as it is in heaven, and sets its feet firmly on the ground of this life. Seeing the world with the eyes of such faith prompts imagination that it could be better, and gives us divine power to dare great things in hope of making a difference. Next Sunday, let’s fill this space with friends we have invited to worship a God who reaches out to all people, who mends broken hearts and encourages fearful souls, who takes the most unpromising environments and brings forth life.

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO DO FAR MORE ABUNDANTLY THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

The Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor