

Sermon: Moving on from Galilee
19 Pentecost, Year B
John 9:38-50

Shelby Ochs Owen
Emmanuel, Staunton
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This week in our Wednesday Bible Study, our teacher Riikka had us focus on geography in the Gospel of Mark, because for Mark, *where* things took place mattered. Today's reading is set in Galilee. While Galilee is certainly a real place, it is also used by Mark as "a symbol for the place from which Jesus calls persons to follow him" so it represents our "own home turf, on which we become ...pilgrims as Jesus leads us on the way to Jerusalem."¹ So when we read or hear about the disciples passing through Galilee, think of us, you and me, who are following.

Just a few verses preceding this one, we learn we are in Galilee and Jesus has just been teaching the disciples what true greatness is, in God's eyes. Jesus teaches them that true greatness lies in service to others, especially to those who have no power. He challenges human assumptions about greatness. He uses the example of a child, held in very low esteem in Greco-Roman culture of the time, to point to the values God holds important. A child had no power, and yet Jesus says, "receive (or welcome) a little one in my name." A child would have symbolized all who have need of help.

Today's reading is a continuation of the journey with Jesus, moving on through and away from Galilee, leaving one's home turf toward Jerusalem, where a deeper and fuller understanding of who Jesus is will come to fruition. In today's reading Jesus teaches what it means to be disciples by saying don't worry about others doing good work in my name. "Whoever is not against us is for us." And Jesus also instructs them not to be stumbling blocks to those who are new in their faith.

When you and I leave Galilee, our home turf, the place where Jesus calls us to follow him, we never really know where that road is going to take us, geographically or spiritually. We don't know if we will be called to leave our home town, if we will be called to forgive an enemy or if we will be called to open our hearts to someone or something new.

Many of you know that Staunton will host its first (Gay) Pride Festival next weekend and Emmanuel will have a presence at an Episcopal table downtown on Saturday along with Trinity Church and Stuart Hall School. Later that evening Emmanuel will host the Pride Eucharist, with the vestry's having approved it. This week someone asked me a very good question. The question was, "What does someone's sexuality have to do with the Eucharist?" My first response to the question was, "Everything!" God's table, which represents God's love and forgiveness, hospitality, acceptance, and newness of life, is the place where we meet God with one another, eating at the same table to symbolize our unity with all of human kind. In the sacrament of the Eucharist we literally and figuratively have a taste of God's goodness, that wonderful outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace. And we do this together.

I want to share with you my own personal journey with how I see people whose sexuality differs from my own. Within weeks after I arrived at seminary, the Episcopal Church consecrated Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop, who was in a partnered relationship. Was he the first gay bishop? Of course not! He was the first openly gay bishop, no longer hiding his identity from

the flock. No longer living a lie. But, at the time I was disappointed in the church's decision. I didn't feel it was right. But then as seminarians often do and not because of Gene Robinson, my classmates and I shared our own stories with each other of how we felt God's call on our lives to become priests. Talk about the Holy Spirit at work! That was such a powerful witness to God's nudge in people's lives – ALL KINDS of people. Lawyers, teachers, stay at home moms, young graduates from college. People in their 20's and people in their 60's. Single, married, divorced, straight and gay. As my gay and lesbian classmates shared their call stories I was struck by how powerfully God was alive and at work in their lives. And that their stories were no less meaningful, their call no less clear than my own, and perhaps even more so. They, too, were called to preach the Gospel! And preach it they did and still do. In hearing their stories my heart was softened and my inner ship was beginning to turn.

When I arrived at St. Anne's, Reston, my first post as a priest, I attended a staff meeting one Tuesday. The staff happened to mention a family of parishioners where there were two moms, as one mom had gone through a transgender experience. I had never encountered anything like this before so I looked to my rector and the rest of the staff to see how they reacted. They were so welcoming and accepting of what to me was a very strange situation that I wanted to emulate them. So I was welcoming and accepting, too. My own inner ship continued to turn toward acceptance and love of the LGBTQ community.

I had left Galilee, my own home turf, and on this journey with Jesus I found an opportunity to open my heart to a bigger segment of God's people. We won't always find ourselves on the same transformative path with Jesus. Being people of God doesn't mean we will always agree with each other. During Mark's writing people in the early church certainly didn't always agree with one another on any given issue. Mark wouldn't have written this bit about being a stumbling block, if some Christians weren't being stumbling blocks to new converts' faith! But Jesus clearly calls us to welcome the stranger, accept those who are or have been treated as outcasts, eat with those whom God calls to the Eucharistic table. For when we have communion together we are showing solidarity with God and God's children.

Jesus has called you and me to follow him. And we are moving away from Galilee. Heading toward Jerusalem, where a new and deeper understanding of how God operates awaits. How might Jesus be nudging you in new and surprising ways to enlarge your heart, to welcome the stranger, to make room at the table?

¹ Williamson, Lamar, Interpretation Series: Mark.", John Know Press, p. 168