



First United Church of Christ
300 Union Street
Northfield, MN 55057
507-645-7532
church@firstucc.org

Spirit-Led
Matthew 4: 1-23
January 19, 2014

I spent last week in a desert wilderness. Actually I spent most of the week in a windowless conference room in a wealthy suburb of Phoenix, but every once in a while we were released. On Thursday I was able to hike through the desert and up a mountain. It was beautiful and rugged. Colleagues saw roadrunners and a pack of javelinas, but not me. I did buy a scorpion trapped in a paperweight and brought it home.

I like the image of Jesus on our bulletin cover today. Partly because he has a scorpion in his hands but also because the image suggests that Jesus has time on his hands. It looks to me like Jesus is trapped in the wilderness for a while. It's as if it isn't time for him to be released yet, so he's waiting, thinking, contemplating. I'll get back to Jesus in a few moments, but first I want to share a little about what I was learning last week.

Last week I was participating in the Next Generation Leadership Initiative of the United Church of Christ. It tries to encourage transformational leadership among younger clergy. Abby and I were both selected for this program and she will begin next year. I barely qualify as young clergy anymore. I am the oldest in my class of 15, the graybeard.

We spent the week learning about Self-Differentiated Leadership and Bowen Family Systems Theory. What is Self-Differentiated Leadership? I'm still not quite sure. I think it's basically about defining yourself: being clear about the person God has called you to be, and

being clear about the many people God has not called you to be. And at the same time you are trying to stay connected to everyone else. Self-differentiated leadership attempts to avoid two problems on opposite poles. On one hand it avoids the problem of trying to be everything to everyone, losing your sense of self. And on the other, it avoids the problem of getting to far out in front as a leader, or simply cutting yourself off from others, especially when there's tension or conflict. What we were learning about last week was about more than leadership, it was about the spiritual life. Am I being that person God calls me to be? Or am I just being the person others want me to be? Am I in healthy relationship? Am I trying to stay in relationship even when it's hard?

All of this conversation was based in family systems theory which says that we behave in the world the way we behave in our families of origin. As we grow up in our families we learn to behave in a particular way and then we take that behavior with us into the world. This is a very uncomfortable truth. So if you want to be healthier anywhere in your life, family systems theory suggests that you try to better define yourself in your family of origin and that will transfer everywhere else. Interesting.

Another thing family systems theory says is that larger relationship systems like churches, businesses, colleges, governments, sports teams, function a lot like families. The patterns of behavior we see in families we will also see in these larger relationship systems. One thing that families like is balance, homeostasis, a family wants to feel settled. It doesn't matter if it's an unhealthy balance, the family just wants balance. So, when one person starts saying, I'm not going to do what I've always done because it is not healthy for me, I'm going to do this instead. The system goes out of balance, and this causes nervousness. The system is going to try to push things back into balance. There's going to be resistance to the healthy change, every

single time. And often, there's isn't anything sinister at all about the resistance to the change, it is simply how we naturally react when someone is pulling something out of balance.

So what a person is to do when they are making a healthy change in their family, in their life, in their work, is to keep defining themselves, "This is who I am called to be." You know resistance is going to come, so you stay calm, you stay connected to those who may disagree, and then you stay the course. This applies to churches too. The more clearly we can define ourselves, become clear about our core values, our purpose, the healthier we will be.

I arrived at the conference late because my Sunday flight was cancelled, but when I showed up the class had just watched a video of Martin Luther King Jr. And they were talking about his self-differentiation. He defined who he was, what he thought was needed, especially a non-violent approach. And then he faced all sorts of resistance, and not just from parts of the nation that preferred a segregated south, but from allies too. Black business leaders resisted the bus boycott saying it was the wrong tactic and the wrong time. White clergy who were sympathetic to the struggle for civil rights told King to be patient, to wait. Bobby Kennedy told King not to march on Washington, "It won't work," he said. When King talked with Lyndon Johnson, a master manipulator, King wouldn't be deterred. He was clear about who he was, the values he stood for, and what he wanted. Through incredible resistance King stayed the course, and who knows where we would be if he hadn't.

Then we watched another documentary titled, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*. This tells the story of Liberian peace activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Leymah Gbowee. Liberia had been stuck in a horrific war since 1989. As Liberia moved into 21st century, President Charles Taylor was committing war crimes against his people, he was recruiting armies of boys and the boys were terrorizing the people. The tribal leaders resisting Taylor weren't much better. Their

armies were also terrorizing the people. Leymah Gbowee organized some women who decided they would pray for peace. They organized Christian women and Muslim women together to pray for peace. They sat in a field every day waiting for President Charles Taylor to drive by and every day he did. At first he ignored them, but then they became powerful enough that he threatened them. He said, "No one will embarrass this administration and anyone who does will be put to death." The women knew their lives were in danger, but they wanted peace for Liberia, the war had to stop. They wanted to deliver this message for peace to Taylor face to face. And not only were the women angry with the boys who were fighting, carrying guns and terrorizing innocent women. The women were also angry with the men who were too afraid to do anything to try to stop the war. So the women organized a sex strike. They resolved not to have sex until the war ended. This worked fine for women in the urban areas but women in the rural areas said it would not work for them. Fine, Gbowee said, just fast and pray. So the women in the rural areas fasted and prayed for two years. The men didn't know they were on a sex strike but they really were.

Wouldn't you know it, some things changed. I imagine there was plenty of resistance, but Leymah Gbowee and the women behind her were able to meet Taylor face to face. Gbowee calmly delivered her demand for peace. Shortly after, peace negotiations with a U.N. mediator began. As soon as peace negotiations started, the war became extremely intense. The families of the women were in incredible distress. But the women went to the peace negotiations, they were clear that they were being called to stop the war in Liberia. The negotiations went nowhere. Gbowee shared that it was like all these leaders were on vacation. They were wearing fancy suits, eating great food, sleeping in fancy beds when they were used to sleeping on the ground. The women decided to surround the conference room where the negotiators were

meeting and to refuse to let them out until they came to an agreement. The security threatened to arrest them. Gbowee stood up and started removing her clothes to force the security guards to endure the shame of arresting a naked woman. The security relented and actually started working for the women, keeping the men inside. The women kept the negotiators locked in and Taylor went into exile, a woman was elected president, and the war ended in Liberia. Again, through incredible resistance Leymah Gbowee stayed the course. Interestingly Gbowee was trained by our beloved Lutherans and some Mennonites.

Ok, back to Jesus. I'm flying home and I need to do some reading in Matthew. I take the risk of opening my bible on an airplane. You never know what people are going to start talking about when you have a bible open on an airplane. This time no one said anything to me. I think they were all afraid.

I read our passage for today and I think, "Oh, Jesus is self-differentiating. He's defining himself. He refuses to let someone else define who he is." Jesus is baptized, and then the Spirit sends Jesus into his ministry. But there's some internal wrestling he has to do first. This is Spirit-Led. There's something Divine going on when we are wrestling with our soul. Jesus is in the wilderness a long time and then the tempter appears. "Jesus, you need bread. You're the Son of God. Give yourself some bread." Come on Jesus, quick fix. But Jesus says, this ministry, this life, isn't just about bread, it's about God. Good for the church to hear, we will go deeper into justice work as we go deeper into the spiritual life. They come together for Jesus, and Martin Luther King, and Leymah Gbowee.

The tempter appears again, "Throw yourself off the temple, have the angels come to your aid. To be Messiah you will have to be a showman, an entertainer." Jesus refuses.

The tempter shows Jesus the countries of the world and will give him the world if he will simply misplace his devotion just for a little while. Jesus refuses. He will worship and follow what is ultimate: God, redeeming love, this power that yearns for and pulls us towards true wholeness. It's as if Jesus is sorting out his call, "Who is God calling me to be?"

Now we can say, well of course Jesus resists these temptations, of course Jesus defines himself and does that wrestling work of discerning who God is calling him to be. He's Jesus, he's not like us. Or, we can see Jesus as a human being like us, through whom we see the activity of God clearly revealed. And when we dare to do this defining work, wrestling with who God is calling us to be, and we define ourselves rather than allowing others to tell us who we will be, in those moments, something sacred is happening. God is working in us and maybe even revealed in us too.

John the Baptist has been proclaiming "the Kingdom of heaven (or God) has come near," and he's arrested for it. There's some resistance in the relational system. And then Jesus makes the ministry of John the Baptist his own, also proclaiming the Kingdom of heaven has come near. And then Jesus starts to build a movement, calling disciples one and two at a time. And those disciples will become leaders in their own right. But Jesus will share the good news that God desires justice and wholeness for the world, and there will be resistance. But he will stay clear on who God has called him to be. Despite all, he will stay the course, for the sake of love, for the sake of the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.