

To paraphrase a famous line from the movie Cool Hand Luke:

What we've got here in these here lessons is a failure of vision.

The gentlemen in the reading from Acts and the gospel of John have missed the message.

Poor Saul. He's just trying to uphold the law that he's followed faithfully his whole life. The one, true, faith would be better off without a heretic or two – don't you think? It's worked in history before! Didn't Yahweh tell us to take out His enemies? Didn't Yahweh save us from those nasty Babylonians to re-establish our line in our land? Didn't He?

Jesus didn't agree.

"Saul," says Jesus, "You need to re-examine your thinking. So, you're going, literally, to be blinded for awhile so that you can reconsider your short-sightedness." ZAP!

Poor Ananias. He was just having a nice dream when Jesus interrupts: “Go take care of Saul of Tarsus.”

“Um, Lord,” says Ananias. “Isn’t he the terrible person killing your followers? Could you pick someone else please?”

“I’m going to use him to my benefit. So, go tend to him.”

“Okay, but I’m not going to like it.”

“Suit yourself, Ananias. Just go do it.”

Poor Peter. Nothing ended up the way he’d hoped. The insurrection against Rome fizzled into a heinous execution. The women came back from the tomb with this outrageous story and then Jesus just appears out of mid-air into a room where they were hiding....and promptly disappears again. Back in Galilee, there’s been no sign of him.

“I’m going fishing.” Peter says.

What else do you do when you don’t know what to do? You do the things you have always done. They’re familiar. They’re comfortable. You don’t have to think.

You just do. You just do the same things repeatedly, even when they cease to be fruitful. You refuse to listen to any kind of advice because, hey – what do they know – you’re the expert in the field (or in the boat).

Unless of course, the advisor is the Risen Christ. And, your colleague sees something that you’ve refused to see. Only then do you try something new and cast your nets in the opposite direction. Voila! Fish, fish, and more fish!

My take away from these stories is that encounters with Jesus are not necessarily ones we’d imagine we would have. In these encounters, our saintly friends have been reprimanded, physically impaired, asked to do something dangerous, and called out of their routine. All these encounters with Jesus required those involved to see themselves and the mission of God differently than they have before.

That’s not an easy thing to hear in a society, like ours, where we follow Jesus with little threat to our existence.

Saul, Ananias, Peter, and the Beloved Disciple had good reason (or, in the case of Saul, GAVE good reason) to hide, to stay silent, to not want to go places that scared you, to just go back to your previous comfortable life. But, Jesus called them out, asked them to see things in a new light, to come to the aid of someone whom they feared, to take what they've always done or known and turn it 180 degrees.

In some ways, we've lost our edge following Jesus in 21st century America.

Freedom of religion (or from religion) is a right that I support, but it makes faith seem a lot less urgent or important.

If we examine the early followers of the Way, we discover that the growth of that group was done during hardship. As Tertullian said, the blood of the martyrs are the seed of the church. Converts were won because of the incredible faith of those being killed for their beliefs. It's a good thing that we're not being sent off to be burned at the stake or beheaded or thrown to the lions.

At the same time, I'm not so sure it's a good thing that faith is perceived as "easy" or "rote".

What do we do to follow Jesus – to see the mission of God in our lives – when we are comfortable? What do we do when the very thought of stepping out to aid someone who frightens us keeps us behind locked doors? What do we do when the familiar doesn't seem to get us anywhere? Do we go on our happy WASPY way? OR, do we say a prayer, join with others who are looking for God.

And then. . .

Get uncomfortable. Move toward the stuff that's scary. Cast our hopes toward the unfamiliar. Make mistakes. Figure out what went wrong and try again. Do scary things and get uncomfortable because Jesus asks you to. He asks us all to do these things because when we move out of our comfort zones we have no other choice than to trust in Him.

In my own life there are so many moments where I had a choice – be comfortable or take a leap of faith.

- Had I chosen comfort; I'd not be a mother.
- Had I stayed with the familiar; I'd not have ventured into business ownership.
- Had I not moved toward scary stuff; I'd have never gone to seminary, let alone moved to Bethesda.

Believe me – I'm not brave. I struggled with all of this. I failed. I learned. I failed again. I learned again. But, I think that Christ wants us to struggle, because if it all came easy it doesn't mean as much. I've come to understand that when I'm really comfortable, when it's all good and calm and going my way, it's a sign that I need to wake up and pay attention or I'm going to find myself blindsided or in a rut that brings forth neither fruit nor fish.

So, if faith coming easy to you now, I bid you find a way to interrupt that. Try something unfamiliar. Do something that makes you uncomfortable. It doesn't have to be a big thing. Just start somewhere.

- Say a new prayer.
- Read the book of Joshua – that’ll get you riled up!
- Start walking the labyrinth from the center instead of the outside. Have a conversation with a young person on your street. (Or, if you’re a young person, have a conversation with a senior person.)
- Create a new vision for yourself.

And, if you are struggling, tell us. We’re here to help you. Someone here has probably had some experience being where you are and can help point you to Jesus on the shore.

If we’re lucky, He’ll cook us breakfast!