

Today is our second week in our sermon series about Presiding Bishop Curry's *7 Ways of Love: practices for a Jesus-centered life*. Today's we turn. Turn toward Jesus.

A parishioner came up to me several years ago and told me about a time she was walking on the beach in Florida.

She was enjoying the lovely day—family, warmth, vacation, relaxation. And then she saw something up ahead on the sand. It was the plastic rings off the top of a 6 pack, washed ashore. She got really angry, thinking of the danger it posed to all kinds of wildlife—fish, mammals, birds—someone's careless action had endangered something--and it ruined her walk.

Thoroughly riled up, she jogged up to where the trash was, and realized that it wasn't trash at all. It was a starfish, with legs that all bent together all the way around, like intertwining circles.

Turns out that what she saw was quite an unusual starfish for Florida. God had brought her something amazing and rare, and in her rush to judgement, without knowing all the facts, her mind had made it into trash, and turned wonder into bile.

Why do we do that—rush to judgement—when we can't even see fully yet what it is we are reacting to?

Maybe it's because we think we *do* see. We are absolutely positive that we see clearly, when in fact, we're reacting without direct, up close experience.

Perhaps in humankind's infancy, it made sense to quickly make snap judgements whether something up ahead was a boulder or a lion. It makes less sense now. And yet, we still do it.

My friend who had been walking on the beach said to me later that she couldn't stop thinking about what had happened.

She said it really freaked her out how quickly she went to the dark place of her fears and anger—because she really thought she had SEEN the plastic

6-pack holder. And she realized that what she thought she saw, what she thought she *knew*- wasn't really there at all. It was a mirage.

What really astonished, upset, and humbled her, was that something wonderful appeared on the beach. And she almost missed it.

She wondered how many times God had put something into her life—something rare in an unexpected place, and she DID miss it!

In my childhood, the rules I was taught were black and white. It's easier for parents to say all strangers are bad, than to be able to discuss concepts of dangerous behaviors of adults with 3 or 4 year old's. They don't have the brain development yet to understand complex decision making.

So it makes sense that during my early religious education I was told to be unwavering on my journey with Jesus. My teachers advised me not to deviate from the straight and narrow. The rules were black and white. Life had to be made simpler because I didn't understand more intricate reasoning. So I was told I was to be a good little soldier of Christ.

To me that conjured up pictures military men marching in straight line formations, not looking to the left or to the right, just following the person in front of them. I could understand that picture, though *even at the time* it was a little bit scary. No deviation. Straight lines. But what happens when later we discover that perhaps we're *not* on a linear path to God?

As I matured, I discovered that God often leads me to the roads and places I least expect. Just lately the road I've been on isn't peopled with soldiers who follow orders, it's filled with people wouldn't know a lock-step from a tango, and who are more likely to raise an eyebrow at a shouted order than follow it.

I've discovered through personal experience, that the straight and narrow road I was told about in Sunday school-- is often full of unexpected twists and hairpin turns.

And God doesn't want us to miss anything.

Sometimes, though, straight roads and familiar countryside makes us feel safer. Are we more inclined to turn away from roads that take us someplace we haven't been to yet—or cruise onto them, even though we may get lost at some point, or need to ask directions?

“Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.’”

The religious leaders and politicians of the first century had built the roads the way they wanted them, and so their inclination was to fear Jesus' road which led to blessing and love for everyone.

That definitely didn't work for them. They resisted deviating off their path—they were following all the people that came before them, not wanting to get close enough to really hear--much less understand-- Jesus' new message.

They saw the potential for Jesus' message to upset the norms of their society. He was putting roadblocks up on their main road, urging people to take an alternate route toward a new kind of being.

Instead of seeing wonder, they reacted in anger. Instead of turning toward, they turned around.

Then Jesus cried out.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

The “Jerusalem” Jesus is talking about is the beloved community who—because of their anxiety-- would rather stone and murder people who bring uncomfortable new messages about love, justice and hope.

It's easier for Jerusalem—us—stay on the main road or stick with simplistic rules than it is confront our discomfort with new ideas. Black and white is always easier than shades of grey. But grey is a color, too.

When we fear change, Jesus wants to hold us until our breathing slows, and we can peek through the eyes we've closed. He wants to warm our hands with his until we can finally let him go and reach out to others.

Jesus is trying to get us to *stop reacting* to things we aren't even close enough to even really see them. We need to get close enough to see what really lies on the sand of the kingdom of God.

Is it something horrible, or something wonderful? We'll never know until we get brave enough to lean in.

The road isn't linear. We need to turn occasionally, turn away from the world which exploits and capitalizes on our fear, and turn toward Jesus, who will always steer us toward love.

Because love is the only way to get there from here.

Amen.