

As many of you know last week I went for a little run. I ran a race that went from Niagara-on-the-Lake to Niagara Falls, and back - 50 KM in six hours, nine minutes, and fourteen seconds. This is the farthest I have ever run. Anything over the regular marathon distance of 42.2 KMs is considered an ultra marathon. I've run several marathons before and it is a strange distance to run.

The distance and name Marathon comes from an ancient Greek legend. The legend goes Philippides is sent from the Battlefield in Marathon to Athens to announce that the Persians had been defeated. He runs the 42 KMs without stopping, bursts into the assembly, announces the victory, and then dies. Okay, so maybe this is not the most inspiring of stories for runners to imitate. This story became a heroic tale that was passed through the ages in story, art, and poetry. Now, inspired by an ancient messenger people all around the world run marathons and sometimes we even decide to run a little further.

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We have now stepped over the threshold from Easter, past Pentecost, and into the Season After Pentecost, or Ordinary Time. It is the time that stretches between Pentecost and Advent, the longest season in the Church year. Its colour is green – the colour of growth and its primary stories are about the life and teachings of Jesus.

What is fascinating about Scripture passages such as the one we hear today is that there is space in the story large enough for us to enter. We

enter into the story and the story enters into our lives. In this way, what seems so ordinary, listening to story, becomes extraordinary as God's Spirit works in our lives.

Today we go back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He has been teaching – the beatitudes have been shared and he has told people to love one another and to love their enemies. Now Jesus, his disciples, and the crowd have entered into Capernaum and this is where we encounter the centurion. Actually we only hear about him through the messengers he sends.

It is very significant that the man who asks for help is a centurion. For the Jewish crowd gathered around Jesus in the story and for the original Gospel audience this centurion represents the enemy. The centurion is a leader in the Roman military who helps to keep Rome's control over the occupied country of Israel. Uprisings are common and that is when the Roman military steps in to put a quick end to any dream of freedom. Leaders of rebellion are killed and when possible they are crucified – a way to remind people of Rome's complete authority over the land.

Entering into the story as the Jewish crowd around Jesus how do we feel when we think about the Roman occupation and oppression? How do we feel when we think of friends and family members who have been hurt or who have died at the hands of the Roman military? How do we feel when we hear that a centurion wants Jesus' help? How do we feel when we remember Jesus' words "love your enemy"?

Entering into the story as the centurion how do we feel when we think about the role we play in keeping military control of Capernaum? How do we feel knowing that despite being the one who often has power we now need to ask for help? How do we feel knowing that we need to ask a Jewish religious leader, healer, and holy person for help? How do we feel knowing that the answer might be no, and that the no might be because we are a leader in the Roman army?

Something powerful happens whenever we place ourselves within scripture giving ourselves time and space to wander around, to see, hear, and feel. The story becomes three dimensional as we reflect on what it is like to be the different characters. This story is very different if we become the Jewish crowd around Jesus, or even Jesus himself, who is a Jewish man living under oppression and occupation. The story is different if we become the centurion or if we think of ourselves as the dying slave. Entering today's story we encounter the vast divide that separates Jesus and his followers from the centurion and his household.

The story continues as Jesus heals from a distance and blesses the centurion for his faith. This story is a lesson on loving your enemy as yourself. It is a story about how God's love and grace crosses the threshold and bridges the divisions that we so often create with one another.

While reflecting on today's reading I was struck with the fact that there is another character inviting us into the story. The messengers are so easy to overlook and yet play crucial role. Yes, sometimes we are called to inhabit

the Jewish crowd in the story struggling with our call to love our enemy. Yes, sometimes we are called to inhabit the centurion as we wrestle with our own sense of guilt, shame, and feelings of unworthiness in order to encounter God's love and healing. But we are also called by God and empowered by the Spirit to be the messengers. We are the ones who are called to the daring work of following God's love and grace as we cross thresholds and bridge divides.

At my first church I had two interesting and very similar encounters that took place within a couple of years of each other. While getting ready for worship at the front of the church I looked down the hallway that connected a side door with the sanctuary. Both times I saw someone standing there hesitantly looking in. I went over, welcomed them, and introduced myself. Both times I was asked the same question "Can anyone join you for worship."

We can be certain that in our community there are people asking not only "can anyone join you for worship" but the more personal question "will I be welcome in the church." There are people who have no experience of church and who believe that the church is a place of judgement and forced conformity. There are also people who have been deeply wounded by the church, told or shown directly or indirectly that they are not welcome, that they do not belong. This wounding may have happened to them in church, or it may have come because of what they have heard from people of faith online, on TV, in books, or through the history of the church. These messengers ask us "can anyone...can I join with you?"

We are called and the Spirit is empowering us to be messengers who cross thresholds and bridge divides. We are called to go out into the streets and share the good news that God's love and grace is for everyone. We are called to go and to encounter God's love and grace from those who stand on the other side of the threshold.

What would this look like? It looks like relationship. Maybe in one case it is inviting someone you know who is testing the edges to join you for worship and to help them feel comfortable and to know that they belong. Maybe in another case it is simply smiling and saying hello to the stranger you see on the street. Maybe it is pushing our self to go into a new place to experience people we wouldn't normally meet and seeing them as God's beloved. This week, let's start each day by saying "I'm one of God's messengers, I'm going to bridge thresholds, and I'm going to share and receive God's love and grace with those around me."

As I neared the finish line of my 50 KMs race I found myself close to tears – not from pain, but because I knew I was going to make it. It was a holy reminder of what I am capable of, what we are all capable of doing when we dare to push ourselves beyond the thresholds of our comfort zone.

Friends, Let us feel the Spirit at work in our lives leading us to cross thresholds and bridge divides knowing that with God there is no divisions only relationship. Let us be holy messengers for we are all part of God's sacred story. Thanks be to God. Amen.