

Muddy Footprints

Last Sunday, about 20 minutes before the Mass began, I figured I'd hustle out to the garden and see what needed picking for our little farmer's market on the back table over there.

I forgot that we just put in a truck load of red clay which hadn't yet been covered by wood chips, so, since it poured rain the night before, after just a few minutes of milling about in the garden, I found myself a lot taller — because I had maybe 6 inches of thick, cement like red mud stuck to the bottom of my slippers!

You could see those muddy footprints I left behind, dragging from the garden across the parking lot and on to the grass lawn, pretty much all week!

I was thinking about that adventure because as I was studying up on today's readings, I came across a wood cutting made back in the 1500's depicting Jesus ascending into heaven.

And, if you look kind of close, you'll see something quite remarkable on that cutting; you'll see that the feet of Jesus are off the ground, because he's ascending, but there, where he was standing just moments before, there on the hillside, are his footprints — sunk firmly into the ground.

Muddy footprints left behind by an ascending Jesus.

Today is the first Sunday after the Feast Day of the Ascension of Jesus, and it's a day that raises plenty of questions.

Like, was Jesus the first astronaut? or, did he go past the orbits of the moon and Mars and leave the solar system on his way to heaven? or, how did a cloud that's made up of water vapor carry him away?

It seems the earliest Christians had similar questions, even those who stood there as witnesses — and yet the response that comes from God, through the strange messengers who show up yet again, is the same response that greets these same witnesses when these same heavenly messengers first meet them at the empty tomb:

"Why are you looking for the living among the dead," they ask the disciples at the empty tomb?

"Why do you stare into space for the one whose footprints remain on earth," they ask the disciples on the day of the ascension?

In truth, we all of us ask these questions, don't we?

Where should we look for God — out there in space, inhabiting some distant heaven, or shall we look somewhere closer to home?

One of my friends told me of an excursion last week to the movies, it seems a group went to see the movie "Heaven is for Real."

That's the movie based on the book about a then 4-year old's near death experience.

My friend encouraged me to take a bunch from St E's to the movie, but I have to say, I'm not so inclined.

I think there's wisdom to be found in those messengers telling the disciples: "lower your gaze, because it's here on earth that God is working — it's here on earth that the muddy footprints left by Jesus beckon to us all."

And so, the heavenly messengers get the disciples focused back on earth.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor and theologian who was captured by the Nazis and put in a death camp.

He has something to say about Jesus' muddy footprints too.

"The body of Christ," he says, "takes up space on the earth.

That is, the Body of Christ makes footprints."

On the other hand, Bonhoeffer says,

"A truth, or a doctrine, or a religion need no space for themselves.

They are only disembodied entities.

But the incarnate Christ needs not only ears or hearts, but living people who will follow him."

Living people who will follow him.

This has many implications, but here's just two.

First, to follow Jesus means to do what Jesus does, and second, to go where Jesus goes.

Which begs the question: what does Jesus do and where does Jesus go?

The answer comes from his very first sermon; that day when he put down his hammer and saw and stood up in Nazareth, there in the synagogue, where, surrounded by family and friends, he takes the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and reads:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

All of which was very well received, until of course, Jesus tells them that he really means what he's just read, and that he, this nobody from Nazareth, muddy footprints and all, is about to bring these things to pass; at which point they try to toss him over the cliff.

The agenda of Jesus is a concrete agenda that is intimately concerned not with **life after death**, but with life **before** death.

The mission of Jesus is to heal our broken world, by healing broken people, so that we might be restored to who we have always been meant to be: creatures made in the image and likeness of a God who delights in his creation, who laughs whole galaxies into existence, who knows exactly the number of hairs on your head.

It is in that restoration from brokenness to wholeness, from being lost to being found, that we receive eternal life.

And here's the strange thing, "eternal life" is not defined in the Bible as a disembodied existence somewhere "up there" with harps strumming and little wings flapping.

No, "eternal life" is defined in sacred Scripture as coming to know Jesus, and in coming to know Jesus, coming to know the Father, **not** after we die, but now, today, Sunday, June 1, 2014, as we sit, smack dab in the middle of our pews, smack dab in the middle of our mortality.

Don't take my word for it, Jesus himself defines "eternal life" for us today:

"And **this is eternal life**, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

Restoring human brokenness in this workaday world of ours is not simply the mission of Jesus, it is the mission of God, just as we hear in today's gospel lesson:

"I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do."

What is the work of God?

It is to heal our broken world, by healing broken people, so that we might be restored to who we have always been meant to be: creatures made in the image and likeness of God.

I know that there are lots of folks who think that the life of a Christian is all about focusing on pie in the sky in the sweet by and by, and I suppose that's why I'm reluctant to promote films or books that make heaven the be-all and end-all of the Christian life.

Focusing on life **after** death allows us to excuse ourselves from participating in God's life **before** death.

The fact is, disembodied souls don't leave behind muddy footprints.

But in calling us to **life before death**, Jesus invites us to become agents of the Kingdom, meaning we cannot serve two masters; he invites us to develop the eyes to see in the least among us the very face of Jesus; he invites us to give time, talent and treasure to building up this strange Kingdom of God, where humility and service are the weapons we carry, where forgiveness is the mantra we sing, where hope, in the face of so much hopelessness, somehow prevails.

Now I know and you know there are those who see a church and think it's nothing but a collection of hypocrites.

"You've certainly heard it said, "Show me a church where the ministers aren't self-serving, where the people aren't hypocritical, where love is genuine, and I'll be the first to join!"

The fact is, that church doesn't exist, it never has and it never will," at least this side of the Kingdom. B. Lundblad (paraphrased).

Instead, God invites us as we are, muddy footprints and all, to be God's imperfect messengers — because when it comes to God, well, there's just no accounting for taste.

The fact of the matter is, God seems to have the most fun with the most unlikely people.

Take Judah's daughter-in-law, for example, a gal named Tamar.

Here's a gal who dresses up like a hooker, seduces Judah, her elderly father-in-law, gets pregnant by this unholy union, and gives birth to the child who will become the great great granddaddy of King David.

Or take St. Peter, the disciple most in love with his own best thinking, yet who comes to see that: "It won't be long before this generous God who has great plans for us in Christ—eternal and glorious plans they are!—will have you put together and on your feet for good." The Message, TR.

And then there's old baldy himself, St. Paul, a self-righteous rule loving zealot who killed many believers only to be knocked on his backside and into a new way of living.

Funny how we so easily forget those foibles, those muddy footprints, of our mothers and fathers in faith, how quickly we look at them with some kind of holy glaze, as if their footprints weren't as muddy as ours seem to be...

It is the writer Annie Dillard who says:

"A blur of romance clings to our notion of these people in the Bible, as though of course God should come to these simple folks, these Sunday School watercolor figures, who are so purely themselves, while we now are complex and full at heart.

We are busy.

So, I see now, were they.

Who shall ascend unto the hill of the Lord?

There is no one but us.

There is no one to send, not a pure heart on the face of the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time.

There is no one but us.

There never has been.

There are generations which remembered, and generations which forgot; there has never been a generation of whole men and women who lived well for even one day.

There is no one but us, not in this time and space." A. Dillard.

On this Sunday after the Ascension, we can stand looking up into heaven or we can believe Jesus when he assures us that:

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

You will make muddy footprints in and through ordinary, imperfect communities of faith that seldom get it right, that frequently get it wrong, that argue and bicker, that kiss and make up.

The ascension of our Lord is not a call to look up into space.

"It is the day to trust that Christ's promise remains down here, **in and around and with us.**

We are not alone - you and I who dance and climb, who run and get knocked down, we who lie on the grass or sit watching the late-night news." Lundblad (paraphrased).

We are not alone.

The Holy Spirit invades our lives, upends our expectations, and transforms confused and bewildered **us** into a people who are, even now, becoming one, as Jesus and the Father are one.

Muddy footprints and all.

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