

February 28, 2010
Luke 9:28-43
Creekside COB
By Betty Kelsey

“Lent and Labyrinths”

I like labyrinths. That is probably not a secret to you. When Creekside purchased our 20-acre lot, I had a dream of building a labyrinth that would be available to everyone-- members, neighbors and visitors alike. I must have said it often enough that others latched on to my dream. I am grateful to Steve DePue for keeping my dream alive and masterminding the building process.

My first experience with a labyrinth was at St. Mary’s campus in South Bend. At the entrance to the labyrinth path is a meditation area with benches for rest and reflection. Attractive to the senses, there are flowerbeds, wind chimes, and a concrete table with a double finger labyrinth. The path of the walking labyrinth has large stepping stones, with exquisite smooth black rocks filling in the space around them.

Each labyrinth is unique, and each setting offers its own style of meditation. The labyrinth at Sisters of Loretto monastery in Kentucky, set in a quiet spot of Loretto woods, uses upright logs to separate the paths. At Still Waters Retreat Center in Buchanan, Michigan, you can find a daffodil labyrinth. You can see that the daffodils were still straggly when I was there last spring. Rosanna and I will be there at the peak of daffodil season this year. Of course, there are less elegant labyrinths mowed into grassy fields, like the one at Camp Mack and on the AMBS campus.

Building the Creekside labyrinth was labor-intensive, and many people helped in its construction. Judy mapped out the outer rim and placement of the curves. The youth group sprayed the pattern on the grass. Steve and others hauled trunkload after

trunkload of old paving bricks from the Goshen street department. And a dedicated crew dug the trenches and lined up the bricks that divide the paths. My contribution was creating the brochure.

The labyrinth and prayer garden are used by Sunday school classes as well as visitors, but nothing is more beautiful or worshipful than the labyrinth in candlelight. At sundown last summer, a group gathered for meditation, using the prayer garden and surrounding area for silence and reflection. As darkness fell, the group began to walk the labyrinth. At the center, each person picked up a candle jar and carried the light back to the entrance. For me, just to sit and look at the lights creates a holy place.

What's so special about labyrinths? First, it's a metaphor for the twists and turns of our journey through life. Sometimes we treat life as a maze, feeling confused and trapped, not knowing which way to go. But a labyrinth has only one path, a path symbolizing our journey with God. On the walk toward the center of the labyrinth, we release and let go of those things that distract or hold us back from being present and attentive to God. At the center, we listen and receive whatever comes to us in the silence. In the walk from center back to the entrance we return to daily life renewed, ready to offer to others what God generously shared with us.

The book, "The Awkward Season," compares Lent with labyrinths. Both represent journeys. Both illustrate the process of releasing, receiving and returning, especially in the Transfiguration story. In the liturgical year, the Transfiguration functions as a hinge between the seasons of Christmas and Easter, or more specifically between the last Sunday of Epiphany and the first Sunday of Lent.

Luke 9 records a strange sequence of events prior to the Transfiguration. Jesus gave power to his disciples to preach and heal. He taught and fed a large crowd of people. He quizzed the disciples, "Who do others say I am, and who do you say I am?" Peter unexpectedly confesses, "You're the Messiah!"

Then Jesus dropped a bombshell. He must go to Jerusalem, where he will know great suffering and death. My response would have been, “Jesus, is this another parable? What does this one mean? Suffering and death? Impossible! You are the Messiah! If Jerusalem is a bad place for you to go, let’s go somewhere else!

A week later, while the other disciples were ministering and healing, Jesus invited Peter, James and John to go with him to the mountain. I wonder why these three disciples were privy to special occasions with Jesus? Did the other disciples notice, and were they jealous? We don’t know. Luke 9 says Jesus went to the mountain to pray. It was to be a time of quiet retreat, apart from the crowds. Did Peter, James and John pray, too? We know that in the Garden of Gethsemane they fell asleep. In this story they were drowsy. And maybe bored? Maybe, like us, they couldn’t maintain attention in prayer.

Suddenly, spectacular events took place. While Jesus prayed, he began to glow with an unnatural brilliance, and his clothes became “dazzling white”--not with the right brand of detergent, but with the glory of God. The disciples were wide awake now. Jesus was joined by Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets. Exodus 33 and 1 Kings 19 tell us it wasn’t the first time Moses and Elijah stood in God’s presence on Mt. Sinai. Here, Moses and Elijah were in deep conversation with Jesus about his imminent suffering and death. It’s doubtful that the disciples overheard the conversation, but Peter did comprehend this was a holy moment that he wanted to preserve. “Let’s stay here and build some tents, one for each of you,” he said. The words were no more out of Peter’s mouth when the whole scene disappeared in a thick cloud, and the voice of God said, “This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him.” When the clouds rolled away, Jesus stood there alone.

We can’t fault Peter for his exuberance. When something memorable happens, it’s our instinct to try to capture it in some way, too—write it down, take a snapshot, draw a picture, freeze the moment. What parent hasn’t run for the camera to capture their child’s first steps? Surprises and awesome experiences

create a glow on our faces and in our eyes. Just check out the glowing expression of a mother or grandmother holding a new baby. Even my grandson, James, got that tender look on his face when he held the doll I gave him for Christmas—but only for a fleeting moment.

As a high school student, John Thomas Randolph tells about a night at church camp. He committed his life to God during a Galilean service. Randolph lit a candle, set it on a floating tray, and lowered it into the Chester River. For Randolph it was a religious high. There were no clouds, or voices, or special beings, but as those candles moved out onto the river, Randolph caught “the shining possibility” of new life in God. (Randolph, *The Best Gift*)

Transfiguration is metamorphosis—an experience that changes us forever.

In Celtic spirituality, mountains are known as “thin places,” where God’s presence is more palpable. Think about it. Glory and revelation often occurred on high mountains in Scripture. For Jesus, the transfiguration was a time of confirmation and affirmation of his ministry. For Peter, James and John, it was a moment that defied description or understanding. It left them stunned and silent, unable to speak to anyone about it.

One father invited each of his young children to identify a special outdoor prayer place in a large city park. Then, on the eve of significant religious days—a first communion or confirmation—he or his wife would take the child to that place for prayerful reflection on the event. McGinnis says it was more than just a religion class, it was a moment of communion with God. (McGinnis, *Households of Faith*)

How does this experience of the disciples tie in with Release, Receive and Return? The disciples had to release or let go of something by taking this trip to the mountain with Jesus. 1) The other disciples were busy preaching and healing, which means Peter, James and John left their ministry to follow Jesus. How often do responsibilities interrupt our journey with God? 2) Jesus often did his praying at night or early morning, so Jesus’

invitation may have interrupted their sleep. Do we willingly give up comforts to follow our call? 3) Like the path of a labyrinth, sometimes the center looks close, but the path draws us away from the center. Other times it seems we are far from the center, but another turn in the path may lead us directly there. Will we follow Jesus when the way is confusing or deceiving? We all have things we hold on to, or distractions we allow to capture our focus. The discipline of release is to free us from what controls our attention.

The second discipline is receiving. Jesus faced the most difficult part of his earthly journey. In releasing his own will, Jesus' oneness with God became so powerful that his countenance changed and even his clothes became dazzling white. That's the epitome of taking in God's presence. We probably do our best praying when things seem their worst, because we have nothing to give ourselves. We can only receive. Perhaps God sent Elijah and Moses to help Jesus receive what was hard to accept. The best thing we can do at the center is to listen. That is what God told the disciples to do on the mountain: "This is my Son, my Chosen—listen to him!"

And last, we return. Peter wanted to prolong the wonderful vision on the mountaintop, but with the disappearing act of Elijah and Moses, there was nothing left to hang on to. Jesus led Peter, James and John back to ordinary life, back to the ministry they were called to. Upon returning, Jesus found that the other disciples suffered from weak faith—they were unable to heal a boy with seizures. Jesus called them "you faithless generation." Would he say that to us? Weak faith is often our downfall unless we give what we have received on the mountaintop—or at the center of the labyrinth.

The journey of Lent, or the labyrinth walk, can lead to transfiguration—if we release those things that hamper our focus, receive the surprises and mysteries of God, and return to the ministry God equipped us for. This Lenten season, Jesus invites us to go to the mountain and back. Pray that we'll follow the journey.

I invite you to practice the disciplines of release, receive and return during this Lenten season. If you would like to use a finger labyrinth as a concrete way to journey with Christ to the cross, I have printed copy at the back of the sanctuary.

Let's pray:

**Lord of the Mountaintop, God of dazzling clothes,
Be with us when we come down from the height of worship
To face a world
That didn't see what we just saw in you.
Show us what to do.**

**Lord of the mountaintop experience, God of dazzling
clothes,
Show us how to be.
Change us; transfigure us
So that this world might see what we have just seen, and
worship you.
Amen.**