

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

May 5, 2019, The 3rd Sunday of Easter, Labyrinth Sunday

Proverbs 3:5-8, John 8:12

LABYRINTH SUNDAY

As I start this morning's sermon, I invite you to take out the blue insert in your bulletin, and fold your bulletin so you can see the cover with the labyrinth.

Today I want to talk with you about walking.

I'd like to start by asking you to remember when you were young (or younger), and you would go for walks with your mom or dad, or a favorite relative or neighbor. Can you remember what it was like to reach your hand up so you could hold their hand?

Do you remember how tall they seemed?

And how safe you felt when their hand wrapped around yours?

Do you remember what it was like to walk with someone who loved you, cared for you, and wanted to know what you were thinking while you walked together?

On the other hand, you can think about going for walks with the young children in your life. There is so much trust when they put their hand into yours. Their hands are so amazingly small as they grab on tightly to us.

They crane their necks way back so they can see our faces while they talk with us.

When we take a walk with children amazing things can happen in our lives because they have so much to teach us.

There is a Benedictine retreat center I used to go to in Duluth, MN. They have a plaque at their beginning of their labyrinth that with a quote from a four year old named Asa. After Asa finished walking the labyrinth with her family, she was asked why other people should walk the labyrinth. And this very wise four year old said: "If you want to know God better, you should take a walk with God."

Today I want to talk to you about walking with God,

Today I want to invite you to walk our labyrinth in much the same spirit in which we walked with the grownups in our lives when we were younger.

God longs for us to take the time to be with God.

God longs for us to reach up our hand and hold on to God.

God longs to be in conversation with us.

God longs for us to make time for God.

As we talk about walking with God this morning, I'd like to encourage you to keep the reading from Proverbs 3:5-6 in front of you. Walking into a labyrinth creates a time for us to put our trust in God.

Those verses read: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.

In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."

When we make time to walk the labyrinth, we are creating a place where we can be aware of God on our life path with us. Of course, it mixes metaphors a bit to talk about God making the pathway straight when the labyrinth path is a winding one. But just as you can trust a labyrinth path to lead you into the center and back out again, we can trust God to walk beside us and guide our steps.

The labyrinth is a wonderful place to take a walk with God.

The labyrinth is a spiritual tool that helps people pray and meditate with God.

For Christians, walking the labyrinth is a walk of faith.

It is a walk that commits us to make time for God.

It is a walk that can change us every time we take it.

People have been walking with God on labyrinths from the earliest years of Christianity. Actually, labyrinths have been found at the sites of many world religions. Some of the labyrinths are between 4000 and 5000 years old, and were clearly used as spiritual pathways for ancient world religions. The placement of the labyrinths marked holy places for many ancient peoples.

When I was in Ireland during my sabbatical, I visited an ancient burial site that is north of Dublin. It is called Newgrange. The burial site is 5,000 years old and its entrance lines up with the winter solstice. There is a large stone in front of the doorway with a three-part labyrinth on it. That stone was there a thousand years later when, around 4,000 B.C., the druids erected the standing stones that surround the burial site.

The earliest Christian Labyrinths began showing up in churches and church yards in the early 300's A.D. They began showing up in churches in Europe during the 12th century. During the years of the crusades it became too dangerous for Christians to make the pilgrimage to the Holy Land, so they would symbolically walk to Jerusalem using the labyrinth. They also used the labyrinth as a tool for meditation in much the same way that we do today.

The most famous of these 12th century labyrinths is the one found on the floor of the nave of Chartres Cathedral in France. The design of that labyrinth is the pattern for our labyrinth across the street. It is not the only pattern that labyrinths take, but it is one of the most recognizable.

Now one of the most important things to remember about labyrinths is that they are not mazes. They are not there to confuse you, or get you lost, there are no twists and turns that will lead you to dead ends. Instead you walk in on the same path you walk out on; it is all the same path.

People that walk labyrinths speak of this path being symbolic of the pathway of life, or the path of faith.

Because you can trust the path you can walk it without looking where to go next.
This frees up your heart and mind to focus on God.

If you look at your bulletin cover you will see what is called an 11-circuit labyrinth, so named because there are eleven turns to the center. This is the pattern of the Chartres labyrinth and ours. The blue insert in your bulletin that has additional information about labyrinths and how to walk them.

As you look at this picture on your bulletins, I want to speak to those of you who are unable to walk the labyrinth across the street. There is another way to walk, and that is by letting your fingers do the walking. This labyrinth begins down at the bottom of your page; you can see where there is only the one opening.

Using your finger, you can trace your way through the labyrinth and carry on many of the same spiritual practices that outside walkers use. The Hiawatha retreat center I've visited up near Cedar Rapids has a labyrinth someone has cut into a large board. The track of that labyrinth is just the width of your finger; if it's raining outside, or too cold, you can still "walk the labyrinth" in the chapel.

As you continue to look at your bulletin cover, you'll notice that the form of the cross very clearly divides the 11-circuit labyrinths into four quadrants.

In the center of the labyrinth is a 6 petaled flower with several meanings. It is actually called a rose, and is a symbol for Mary, the mother of Jesus. In addition, in some mystical traditions the rose is a symbol for the Holy Spirit.

There are also some who say each petal of the flower representing one of the six days of creation. The center of the labyrinth is a place of rest, and so represents the seventh day.

There is another thing I want to point out about walking the labyrinth. It is not for everyone. It is one of many forms of meditation and prayer. For some of you it may become a weekly habit, for others of you, you may find communion with God in another way. There are many ways to walk with God.

I found as I began walking labyrinths that it took a few times to feel comfortable. But now I can't imagine not taking that walk of faith.

There is no right or wrong way for walking with God in the labyrinth. Though there are three basic movements to walking: releasing, resting and returning. You'll find these on the blue insert at the bottom of the 1st page.

The first movement is the walk to the center, this can be a time of focusing on a question or issue or person that's been troubling you, it can be a time for praying, for reflecting on a passage of scripture, of asking forgiveness, or grieving, or just being with God. The walk in allows us to **"release"** and let go of our distractions.

When you arrive at the center it is a place of **"resting"** with God. You can take all the time you need in the center; it is a quiet and peaceful place for you and God to be together.

Then on the way back we are **"returning"** bringing with us the insights, the peace, the answers that we may have found during our walk in.

There is a lot more information on the bulletin insert that I'm not going to focus on today. I hope you will take it home with you and continue to learn more about labyrinths and the many ways to walk them. Then come and walk our labyrinth.

Personally, I walk the labyrinth when I'm seeking an answer to prayer,
I've walked when I'm grieving,
when I'm working on my sermon,
when I'm feeling overwhelmed and need to refocus on God,
sometimes I walk just because I need to feel close to God and be reminded of God's love for me.
sometimes walking is a time to praise God,
sometimes I sing while I walk...but not too loudly.

Yesterday during our World Labyrinth Day Walk at 1 p.m. the woman facilitating the walk, Dolores Sierra, says that she likes to listen to music and sometimes dance her way through the labyrinth.

It is my hope that after worship today, those of you who so choose will come over to the labyrinth and walk. Or come back in the next week if you would like to walk it alone.
(And yes, you can have your coffee and doughnut first!)

Our labyrinth is a gift to the people of our community who are on spiritual journeys. We've had students from Augustana come as a class to walk it. This past fall we had two police officers who were from Chicago walk our Labyrinth. They were in the Quad Cities for a workshop and looked us up on the world-wide Labyrinth Locator, and then came to walk with God. When I looked out my office window, I saw them standing in the center of the Labyrinth praying together.

I love that our church shares this meditation and prayer tool with our community.

About 14 years ago I led a labyrinth workshop for Parish Nurses from our area churches. One of them came back the next week. She brought 5 women from her church whom she meets with regularly. They are in their early 20's and each of them has had a difficult life. After their walk she wrote me a wonderful letter about their experiences, and although I shared the letter with you 10 years ago, I'd like to share it again today. It provides a wonderful invitation to come and walk our labyrinth and it lets us hear some of the ways people experience God while walking. She wrote:

"Dear Pastor Sherwood,
Last night I took 5 young women (ages 20-25) *to your labyrinth* (there) and they really had a great experience. I brought my guitar for worship. I encouraged them to spend the time walking into the labyrinth to petition God, repent, meditate and to do so quietly - to resist the temptation to speak to each other as they passed by. In the middle, we first prayed and worshiped with a few songs, then they began to share some of their insights. It was evening and the sun was very bright. Here are some of the thoughts they shared:

"I took my sandals off and walked barefooted and I noticed how in the sun, the grass was really hot, but in the shade, it was cool, comfortable. It made me think of life. There are times when the "heat is on" and it's not very comfortable, then you enter into the shadow of God 's protection and there's comfort there"

Another girl shared: "I thought of it the opposite way. The shade was like a shadow of fear that I'd pass through, then I'd enter the sunny areas and it reminded me that even in the shadows, the SON is still shining and things will be fine"

Another girl said: "I felt kind of restricted by the taller grass, like I could only walk a certain way. Then I realized that the path was THE WAY. And I also realized that each turn made me feel slightly anxious - it didn't always take me where I thought it would or should - and that made me realize that's how I face life: with anxious thoughts about where I am going on the path"

Another girl: "I looked up and lost my footing. I realized I needed to stay focused.... focused on God"

Another: "I looked up at the other girls and realized we are all on the same path of life: even the same walk (of Christianity), but some are farther along and some are behind. But we all end up in the same place"

Another: "I felt really free when I got to the long stretches and there weren't so many turns and twists in the path. I feel like that right now in my life - like I'm walking on the carefree happy path" (This girl just got engaged).

Their leader continued the letter: "After we shared, I had the girls walk out of the labyrinth and spend the entire time ONLY praising God - to think of every name in the Bible God is called or to quote scripture that talks of God's goodness and mercy - but to not (petition) to ask for anything.

After that, they shared their comments:

"It seemed like the path out was shorter, though I know it wasn't - Maybe because my focus was different"

"I felt more peace coming out than going in"

"The cars driving by didn't distract me as much"

"I looked at the cars driving by and noticed how many of the people seemed distracted - talking on cell phones or reaching for something. (They) Seemed in a hurry. Here I was just praising God that I didn't need to be in a hurry right now"

"I wanted to raise my hands and shout at times. I felt so full of the love of God"

She concluded writing:

"As you can see - this was a very positive experience for these girls. They've even said that we should come back often and each time, have a different focus in and out of the labyrinth. ... (your program) was inspiring to me in May and I really got even more out of doing it again with these young women. God is SO good!

Be blessed, Barbara"

Today I want to invite you to walk our labyrinth,
Or to make time for God in another way,

because:

God longs for us to take the time to be with God.
God longs for us to reach up our hand and hold on to God.
God longs to be in conversation with us.
God longs for us to make time for God.

Won't you come and get to know God better by taking a walk with God?!

(cf: SER-09-09-27)

HANDOUT:

If you want to know God better, you should take a walk with God. --4 year old Asa

The Labyrinth

The labyrinth is an ancient sacred path found in all religious traditions, the most famous being the 11-circuit labyrinth laid in the Cathedral of Chartres, France in the late 12th century. The labyrinth is a winding pattern, not a maze, leading to the center and back out again reminding us of life's journey. A maze is meant to trick us, a labyrinth guides us on a trusted path. It is meant to be walked as a form of meditation and its purpose is to connect us more fully with God, ourselves, one another and all creation.

The Labyrinth is a place of prayer. It is not magical; it is not designed to give you a peak mountaintop experience. The Labyrinth provides a means for finding inner space, allowing us to listen to God. There is not a right way to walk the Labyrinth; the Labyrinth is simply a tool. It is helpful to many, but may not work for everyone. It may take several times of walking the Labyrinth to get acquainted with this spiritual tool.

The Labyrinth ties us to our daily experiences. The path leads towards the center, but then moves us to the outer edges. The pathway runs in one direction, and suddenly, we twist and turn another way. Sounds like daily life, doesn't it? Life is going well, then suddenly things change. Times are difficult, but then we receive an insight that allows us to look at our lives and God from a whole new dimension. The shape of the Labyrinth helps us to make a connection with our daily experience.

The Labyrinth helps us to let go. As we prayerfully seek Christ's guidance in the symbolic walking of the path, we may be offered a chance to truly lay our hearts open before God who is the searcher of our hearts. Too often our understanding of prayer stays at the level of thoughts and words we direct toward God, whether those words are printed on a page or offered spontaneously. The unpredictability of the Labyrinth's twists and turns helps us to relinquish our need to feel in control, and to help us acknowledge our dependence upon God.

PREPARING TO WALK TO THE LABYRINTH

3 BASIC MOVEMENTS

The key to fully experiencing your walk is to remain open. There is only one path; you can trust the path to take you to the center and return you to the beginning.

There is no right or wrong way for walking with God in the labyrinth. There are three basics movements to walking: releasing, resting and returning.

Releasing: The first movement is the walk to the center, releasing or letting go of cares and stress, control and concerns. This can be a time of focusing on a question or issue or person that's concerning you, it can be a time for praying, for reflecting on a passage of scripture, of asking forgiveness, or grieving, or just being with God. The walk allows us to release and let go of our distractions.

Resting: When you arrive at the center it is a place of resting with God. You bring with you your experience of walking to the center. Now you can take all the time you need in the center; it is a quiet and peaceful place for you and God to be together, connecting at a deeper level.

Returning: Then on the way back out of the labyrinth we are returning, bringing with us the insights, the peace, the answers that we have found during our walk in. We are returning to the day to day patterns of our lives, carrying with us our experiences with God in the labyrinth.

SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUR WALK

There are as many ways of walking the labyrinth as there are walkers. Here are a few suggestions:
Gracious (Grace-Filled) Attention: Let all thoughts go. Allow a sense of attention to the moment to flow through you. Be aware of your God walking with you.

Ask a Question: Focus on a question you have been asking yourself, or a decision you are making. Walk with a listening heart.

Use Repetition: Repeat a mantra, word or phrase, or sentence of Scripture over and over.

Offer Prayer Concerns: Bring to mind persons or issues for which you wish to pray.

Honor a Benchmark: A birthday, a life-style change, an anniversary, a memorial can be the focus of your walk.

Body Prayer: Move spontaneously and freely as your body wishes. Find your own rhythm and way of being on this walk.

Sing your way around the labyrinth. Singing hymns and songs that help you focus on God.

PRAYERFUL WAYS OF APPROACHING YOUR LABYRINTH WALK

Openness: God, what do you want me to know, what do you want to show me?

Intercessory Prayer: Praying for another person or a situation.

In honor of a significant day or transition: A birthday or anniversary. Thank God for a new opportunity in your life. Remembering the anniversary of a loved-one's death

Use a prayer phrase: Repeat one of God's names that has particular meaning for you, or a spiritual word that has significance for you.

Reflection: Reflect on your life or something significant that is concerning you right now.

As a new approach to an old problem or memory: "God, I need to talk with you and gain new insight or commitment about this situation..."

Walking with a question that is important to you: Identify a central question in your life. Reflect and ask God questions such as: What is my next step? What am I seeking? What are my spiritual needs around this question?

Focus on Jesus walking with you: Let us this be a time of walking together without seeking answers or asking questions, instead focusing on the companionship of this time together.

(A portion of the text is from Jill Kimberly Harwell Geoffrian: Loving God with All of Who You Are: Labyrinth Learnings for Life.)