

A JOURNEY TO HOPE
Choosing Your Traveling Companions
Mark 10:13-16

I love this passage of scripture. It reminds me that God has a very special place in his heart for kids. Mark's gospel records a story about Jesus and children.

The people brought children to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. The disciples shooed them off. But Jesus was irate and let them know it: "Don't push these children away. Don't ever get between them and me. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom. Mark this: Unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in." Then, gathering the children up in his arms, he laid his hands of blessing on them.

Apparently some people wanted to have their children blessed by Jesus and for him to lay his hands on them. But the disciples wouldn't allow it. They tried to keep the children from Jesus. Their thinking was that children weren't that important to Jesus and they he didn't need to be bothered with them. So, the disciples shooed them away to keep from bothering the Master.

But Jesus would have none of it. He told his disciples to bring the children to him. He picked one up and like a good preacher doing a children's sermon, tells his disciples, *"Unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in."* Then he laid his hand on them and blessed them.

This is a great passage to preach on Children's Day in the church or at an infant baptism. Why? Because it clearly shows us the importance of children in God's kingdom. But when you stop and think about it, we're all

God's children, aren't we?

Today I want to talk about choosing our traveling companions for our "Journey to Hope." By the way, today I begin my Lenten Sermon Series of 5 sermons. Each week we'll look at a different aspect of life that threatens to trip us up or get us off our path toward hope. We'll look at things like self-esteem, our jobs, our temptations, money, suffering, and yes, we're going to talk a little bit about death too. That will take us up to Holy Week.

Let me ask you a question: Is there now or has there ever been someone who has gotten in the way of your relationship with Jesus? Ironically it was Jesus' own disciples that interfered with the children getting access to Jesus. But what about you? Have certain people, for instance, tried to block you from your relationship with Jesus? And if so, how did you get past them and get connected with other people who won't block your relationship with Jesus and instead will encourage you to reach your goal?

I know of several married couples that get in the way of each others relationship with Jesus. One is a believer and the other isn't. One may be growing in leaps and bounds in their faith, while the other resents the fact that the other person is always at church, always doing something for others, and so on.

Our friends can be another obstacle to Jesus. They can try and pull us away from our church attendance and urge us to do other things with our time. Sometimes our friends don't understand that our relationship with Jesus is the most important friendship we have!

Our bosses and co-workers may even fix our schedules so that we spend more time at work than at church, working us on Sundays when they know that we like to go to church.

This is especially tough on young people. The peer pressure today is unbelievable. I'm so proud of our youth and youth group leaders, and the job Ray is doing! These kids have so many temptations to fall into drug abuse, drinking, porn, and gangs—all very harmful to them and roadblocks on their road to hope.

Here's the point I'm trying to make today: *Our traveling companions we travel with on the journey to hope, our life's journey, can make good times better, and difficult times less difficult.* That's right. So the question becomes, Who are you traveling with through life? On your journey to hope?

Now think about some of the trips you've taken in your life. Who went with you? Your spouse? Your kids? Your mother in law??? How about those long road trips on vacation when the kids yell from the back seat every 10 minutes..."Are we there yet?"

I'll never forget my one and only trip to Europe a few years ago. My traveling companions were classmates from Wesley Seminary. We toured Poland and the concentration camps of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Berkenow. But my best buddy, Rev. Mike Hurley from Conley's was my real pal on that trip. He made the trip very enjoyable even though at times it was difficult and frustrating.

But have you ever traveled with someone who actually tried to keep you from your destination? From where

you belong? From reaching your goal? I can't honestly say I have, but I DID get some funny looks from some of my co-workers at the insurance office I worked in when I told them I was being called into the ordained ministry. Fred Duncan? Really?

I've been thinking about something for a while now, every since I went to an Evangelism training session a few months ago. Someone suggested that when new people join the church that they be connected with a mature, experienced Christian as a kind of mentor or shepherd for them. These persons would be spiritual guides, so to say, that new Christians could build a relationship with or just be available to bounce things off of, talk about their faith, or offer encouragement in their walk of faith.

With that in mind, I've asked several of our "seasoned Christians" to be part of a new project here at Bethel. They've agreed to be spiritual companions for anyone wishing to have someone come alongside them in their Christian walk, the journey to hope. These "shepherds" have agreed to be encouragers and guides for you. So, I've provided a sign-up sheet on the back tables if you wish to have one of these companions for your journey. It's just another way the church can be a true community.

But if the one on one thing isn't your cup of coffee, or tea, or whatever, how about a simple get-together after the service each Sunday? Maybe we could gather in a corner with some coffee to just hang out for about an hour or so and talk about our journeys.

Or how about a small group study. I've been thinking about what we'll do after Easter as far as a study is concerned. I'm thinking about young couples and young families that have a hard time getting to bible study

because of all your obligations. Maybe you can give me some feedback as to what might work for you. An online study? An after church study? A men's or women's study on a Saturday morning?

Here's the thing: all these things I've mentioned are part of what it means to be on the journey together. It means being part of a community—a community that needs each other to help one another through life. Life is hard enough as it is. Life can beat you down. That's why we need traveling companions on our journey to hope.

Emily Kimbrough once said, *“Remember, we all stumble, every one of us. That's why it's a comfort to go hand in hand.”*