

“Leaving Home”
Matthew 10:5-15
October 11, 2020

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food.

Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

We can only imagine how it felt for the Burkard family to board a Boeing 707 airplane in 1960, winging away from post-WWII West Germany to Los Angeles in America. Gus was thirteen years old at the time. Already in his young life, he and his siblings had been uprooted from their life in East Germany, spent time after his primary family escaped to the West in refugee camps and with extended family, and had all finally reunited in an apartment in Bohum (BO-home), West Germany, while his father worked well below the earth’s surface as a baker-turned coal miner.

Finally, the reunited Burkard family was leaving home for a new land, the land of opportunity, America. Again, the family was separated for a time, split up across households in the greater Los Angeles area. Gus told me that when he came to this country, he could say “yes” and “no” in English—that was about it. He and his younger sister, Gabi, were enrolled in a Los Angeles school for immigrants. They learned much of the new English language—and faster-- by watching TV shows—“Gunsmoke” and “Sea Hunt” were fascinating to Gus, and they were his favorites. His mother was quite homesick during those years, and it pained the family to

watch her suffer for her homeland and former life.

Likewise, we can only imagine what it was like for the Datema family to celebrate the birth of Ralph in 1944 while at the same time worrying for their husband and father. As Ralph told the story last Sunday, his father was incarcerated by the Nazis for working with the Dutch resistance. Miraculously, he was released by the Germans after just a few weeks to work the farm in support of the enemy war effort. The Datemas had a long-standing dream of immigrating to America, but the war put everything on hold in their life and plans.

Ralph's early years were spent in the spectre of world war as his parents continued to dream of a new life, making connections and plans to follow other family to America. With an Episcopal priest from their home region as their US sponsor, the Datema family settled in Springfield, Missouri in 1948. Ralph told us that he lived a surreal life in those first years in the US. Inside his home, he was still in Holland. Language, food, customs—all Dutch. But when he ventured outside his new home, he was in America.

He picked up the English language and customs from his best friend, an American boy 1 year older than him who lived next door. Church families also were helpful in his learning the language, but there were no formal educational programs provided for immigrants in his town. Immigrants were not readily welcomed in America in those years; they were considered lower class and often treated unfairly and with open contempt. They had to fight and scratch to fit in and to learn what they needed to be successful Americans.

I thank Gus and Ralph for answering my questions and giving me express permission to tell their stories in church today.

This week we study in our Fall Film Series the fictional history of Eilis (EYE-lish) Lacey, a barely-adult Irish woman who in the 1950s hears the call of America and sets her sights on making a new life for herself there. Though her widowed mother tries to dissuade her from going, Eilis is determined to leave home and

seek her future in the Land of Opportunity. The film paints a clear picture of the courage it took for her to come alone to America. Although English is her native tongue and that gives her some cultural advantage over other immigrants, she knows nothing else about American life or ways.

Like many immigrants, she has the help of a local church and a kindly priest who sets her up with a place to live, employment, and a church home. These are her lifelines. *Brooklyn* is a heartwarming and bittersweet film about a woman's leaving home, feeling homesick, and finding love during her first experiences in America.

Sharon McCreary, our guest today, works as Volunteer Coordinator at Emily Griffith Opportunity ESL – English as a Second Language—program, a community service for mentoring and befriending refugee women living in the Denver Metro area. She will tell you more of her story, but she told me that much of her work is with women suffering PTSD from war, cultural disorientation as they move from a rural life to an urban one, language difficulties and the experience here of racial & ethnic prejudice, especially against foreign-born women.

Leaving home is a gargantuan undertaking; these stories, both real and imagined, are a testament to will and dreams and actualizing both, usually under arduous and disruptive circumstances. They are a foundational, critical part of our American story.

Stories of leaving home are also foundational to our understanding of faith. Our ancient history includes the Hebrews, also called Israelites, taken from their home as enslaved people, liberated and then enslaved again in their exile. At last, they settled in the foreign land of Canaan, full of equal measures of promise and danger. The story of the Israelites and later the Jews, when their religion was codified, also involves the taking of land from others and the decimation of other cultures, all under the name of God.

We enter into the time of Jesus when Jews are again living in oppressed and

occupied times. They are free to practice their faith as long as they do not ruffle Caesar's tailfeathers, but he keeps them in their place with threats, violence, incarceration, and public execution. This will be Jesus' fate, but not until he ruffles those tailfeathers too much, not until he lights a fire under them with a new dream, a new vision, one that puts compassion and justice above righteousness and law.

In this passage from Matthew, he sends twelve trusted followers out on a mission from God: to heal the sick, feed the hungry, tend the lepers, and even to raise the dead. All of these ministries fly in the face of the law and order fearmongers of the day. The ministries of Jesus are not righteous; they are not lawful; they are not celebrated; they are not allowed. Nevertheless, this is what Jesus sends his people out to do. This is the only time in Matthew's Gospel that the 12, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, are referred to as "apostles."

Apostle has a separate meaning from "disciple." Disciples are students of a wisdom teacher. Theirs is a passive role, as the teacher, in this case Jesus, imparts to them his sacred knowledge. "Apostles," in contrast, are ambassadors and missionaries of the faith that has been instilled in them. In this passage, the apostles may or may not be the same twelve as the disciples, but whoever they are, the apostles have likely been around Jesus a good long while soaking up his sense of mission and purpose.

In this passage, it is clear that the time has come for the disciples and others to become the primary actors, missionaries for the way of Jesus in the world. Jesus, in effect, is commissioning his trusted followers to leave the comforts and securities of their homes and take their faith out on the road to their own siblings in faith, the Jews.

Why not to all people, including the Gentiles and the Samaritans? This passage reflects Matthew's bias against the Jewish aristocracy, those who do not accept Jesus as the true Messiah.

We know nothing definitively of the private, personal life of Jesus as a young man, but there is no suggestion in any of the four gospels that he is particularly

attached to a home of his own, or any one Galilean community or people, except maybe for his mother and perhaps a brother or two—again, we are not sure.

“Leaving home” for Jesus is a necessary prerequisite for the life of an apostle, for a missionary of the Good News. In Jesus’ view, ministry is simply not done from an easy chair in one’s own livingroom, though it may be done as a visitor at another’s dining table. Ministry is not done in a safe upper room behind locked doors, but down on the street in the midst of the suffering people of God, in harm’s way and in the face of injustice and apathy.

The apostle’s life requires that she or he leave home.

Lately I am hearing a common, wistful theme that many in our congregation are missing our physical church building. I am asked, “Can’t we go back inside for worship? I promise I’ll be good and not hug anyone or sing or sit too close!” and told, “I miss my church family and I long to be at home in our sanctuary again.” We want to bargain with the universe so that we may return to our familiar, comfortable recent church past. It’s a common lament, one that I share with you, believe me.

We have left home, however. We have traveled to faraway strange lands, to the land of Zoom, a land that is not located on any map, a land without borders or familiar norms, rules of law or population. It’s all still so unsettling. Some days we can travel there rather seamlessly, but on other unexplained frustrating days, we can’t get the internet to connect, we can’t get the link we have used countless times to work again, we lose juice in our laptop or phone battery, we can’t get our volume set right, we forget to unmute or to mute, it’s all so, well....foreign.

And that’s *now*, after seven months of pandemic living. Remember what it was like the first few weeks? I, for one, had absolutely no idea how to conduct a worship service on a computer software program only previously used for meetings. None of us on the Worship Team yet knew that we couldn’t all sing at once or in unison recite our prayers or the Call to Worship. Rosanne and Shellie

didn't yet know that they would be pressed into service by a frazzled and panicked pastor who couldn't figure out how to use PowerPoint or UTube or Zoom to put it all together.

Denise, our Treasurer, was yet to learn the financial pieces we had to put in place to purchase the hardware and the software we needed to make it all run. The Sunday in April when Zoom went down worldwide, we had no alternative in place. We had to treat it like a snow day and cancel worship. Frustrating. And the day my computer unexpectedly just shut down, and kept shutting down-- beyond frustrating.

We left home, scrambling to find a new place to worship, a new language to speak, new dreams to dream and new ways of being church. Jesus never promised us we would be safe and secure, and he was right; we were displaced, disoriented, and disenfranchised. Our old headquarters on Democrat Rd. are currently unsafe and dare I say it... may be unsustainable for the future. Like Gus and his family, like Ralph and his, like the refugees who come here on a wing and a prayer, we have left home. We are the apostles sent out to push against well-defined frontiers, to bring the Body of Christ out into the world. We are 21st century, pandemic-times missionaries, commissioned to heal the sick of spirit, the disheartened, the spiritually dead, and those starving both literally and figuratively.

We are UCC Parker Hilltop and we are on the move. Longing for our pre-pandemic comfortable ways of worship and community life will not restore it. We are called to a new thing, a new creation.

Wishing for the freedom to be maskless and in close quarters, wanting those Sunday hugs from Randy and the rest of the Deacons and pastor will not make it so. I miss those hugs too, but just as the Holy Spirit kept Paul from going to Asia to preach, Spirit has other plans for us now.

We are not alone. We have each other. You have your church friends and family, your pastor, musicians, liturgists and children. You have learned the new culture of how to worship online and for some of you I recognize that it has been a

tremendous burden. For others of you, you have expressed that it has been the blessing of a lifetime. Your voices span the entire line of the story.

In *Brooklyn*, Eilis stays at the home of Miss Kehoe, a woman of faith and purpose who runs a boarding house for immigrant girls. She is a steady guide for her residents, a mother figure that they need while they gain a foothold in their new and unfamiliar environs. Eilis is terribly homesick for her sister Rose, and her mother, too, but she has heard the beckoning call of America, and she has left home to explore it. Back home in Ireland, her former employer, a wretched, mean woman, bemoans that “mothers are always being left behind in this country.”

When Rose dies unexpectedly, Eilis is torn between her new life and love, Tony, and the need to be home for her mother who is now left all alone. Tony understands when Eilis tells him she must travel back to Ireland. He acknowledges, “Home is home.” But Eilis speaks her reality when she replies, “I’m not sure I have a home anymore.”

This line makes me think of Ralph’s story in particular, how he felt in between two worlds in his first years in America. In his words, he felt “set apart from most people I would get to know...challenged by difference and longing for connection.”

Maybe some of you feel like you don’t have a church home anymore. Maybe you feel hopeless that we will ever worship in the beautiful sanctuary again, hug each other with reckless abandon, or share cakes and coffee in a noisy Callahan Hall. Maybe you feel disconnected and in disarray with how we do things now. I still feel this way some Sundays, even as we are getting smoother each week with our Order of Worship, connectivity, and slide guides.

I encourage you to read the scripture passage again and to ask yourself, “Where is Jesus calling us?” It is his signature that he asks us a question, sends us out, and gives us an assignment. I may not know where we are headed in months to come, but I know this. Jesus is decidedly *not* calling us to stay in our pajamas all week, lounging around and moping about on our couches or in bed about what was our church life in February, and cursing the pandemic or the direction we

have taken or what was or will be. He says, "Shake the dust off your sandals," and move to the next place in your life's journey.

Barbara Brown Taylor is prophetic in her book, *An Altar in the World*, when she teaches us about walking away though we don't know what awaits us at the next destination:

To detach the walking from the destination is in fact one of the best ways to recognize the altars you are passing right by all the time. The journey is the point. The walking is the thing...In my life, I have lost my way more times than I can count... While none of these displacements was pleasant at first, I would not give a single one of them back. I have found things while I was lost that I might never have discovered if I had stayed on the path. (56, 72-73)

Dear God, we ask your blessing on each and every person who has left home in search of a better life, a new start, a dream and an opportunity. Help us grow and grow closer as a church family as we, together with your Holy Spirit, discern and experience what it means for us to also "leave home" and, as apostles of the Good News, journey beyond our doors to find your altars in the world.

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