

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for August 23, 2009 in the Old Broad Street Church
Lessons: Genesis 12:1-9 and Luke 10:25-37

ALONG THE ROAD

From early childhood on throughout our lives, we balance our need for security and comfort with our need for adventure, exploration, learning, and growth. Before she can even roll over, the baby explores with her eyes, and once she begins to crawl, her parents scramble to “baby-proof” the house, knowing she will get into everything she can reach. A prominent psychiatrist explains the infant’s quest for knowledge this way:

A baby . . . is a learning machine - the infant cortex is designed to assimilate an astonishing amount of new information in a relatively narrow window of time. We might learn pre-algebra in 7th grade, but we learn how the world works (and this includes everything from gravity to language to the coded meaning of facial expressions) before the age of three.

This little learning machine, the human baby, has curiosity no cat can match, but she also remains defenseless and unable to care for herself far longer than animal babies. The creature born with the greatest need to explore, examine, test, and learn is born also with the greatest and most extended need for nurture and protection from adults. Obviously, the baby left on her own would not survive. Not so obviously but just as truly, the baby left without nurture and love will not thrive. The child who as an infant was not given face-to-face time with a parent or parent surrogate, who was not cuddled and talked to, who did not have the chance to “make faces” back and forth with the loving adult, will enter school with such a huge disadvantage that she or he may not catch up.

Life is a journey. From birth to death, we never finish our quest for life, and the person who drops out suffers terribly for it, even if the choice made was for safety and comfort at the expense of curiosity and adventure. Security is supposed to bring peace of mind, and for the curious child, it provides a home base for exploration. For adults, however, security overdone can become the prison in which we confine ourselves, where the desire for peace of mind leads to an enclosed mind looking out through the bars with dismay at the ever-changing world. Learning is replaced by the repetition of familiar verities, and the days of our lives fill up with habit, routine, and tradition. The quest has ended prematurely, and mere sameness is exalted as truth.

“Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.” Because faith is a life force, faith is also a quest we never finish while life lasts. Faith is not meant to be the mere recitation of beliefs held as absolutely true, without question or, often, even much thought. Abram and Sarai are to set out on their journey, and what they need to know and trust is that God will go with them and lead them. Christians who want from God a predetermined plan for their lives are misunderstanding the way God works with us. If God had wanted robots, we would be programmed to make the right decisions all the time and take the right paths always, but God made us to be free so that we could love without obligation, seek justice for others without coercion, and choose to care and give of ourselves without advantage or reward.

The last sentence of our lesson from Genesis reads, “And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negev.” Is that not a metaphor for life? Do we not, all our days, journey on by stages toward a land not yet known?

Picture yourself in an airport with a group of friends. You are walking together when you come to one of those moving walkways that is really a long conveyor belt for people. Your friends step onto it, but you decide to walk alongside them on the stable floor and continue your conversation. At some point you stop. You like this spot, and there you stand looking around. When you turn back to say something more to your friends, they are gone, and strangers are coming toward you who hear your words but pay no attention because they have no idea what you are talking about or why you are speaking to them. They were not in on your conversation, and they do not know or trust you. You are the church.

Why don't they want to sing our old, familiar hymns? Well, familiar to whom? Do the people in their twenties share my memories of the 1950's and '60's? Obviously not, but why is the obvious not clear to us? And what is our frustrated response when we learn people don't care much about the church? We say, “Well, they should.” There is something that would be amusing if it were not so sad about our notion that we can change reality by declaring it should not be the way it is. For example, people oppose breakfast in our schools because, they say, the children's parents should serve them breakfast at home. Well, yes, that would be nice and proper, but for a variety of reasons, justified or unjustified, children go to school hungry, without breakfast and perhaps without having had a proper supper the night before. So, here we are telling children who, because they are hungry, cannot focus their attention on learning, “We're not going to feed you because you should not come to school hungry.” That helped, didn't it? And if you find me stuck by the side of the road because my fuel gage stopped working and my car ran out of gas, will you tell me I shouldn't be trying to drive around without gas and leave me there?

Jesus calls us to follow him and, at some point in our discipleship, he invites us to move up and walk along with him. “I no longer call you servants but friends.” Why won’t he just stand still and let us stay comfortably where we are? How can he stand still when we have so much more to learn and when, like the airport walkway, the world keeps moving?

The authority on the Torah, the teachings of God, has embarrassed himself by answering his own question with which he had hoped to embarrass Jesus. So, having said God wants him to love his neighbor with the same kind of care he gives to his own needs, the man asks for clarification, “Who is my neighbor?” What he’s really asking, of course, is, “Who is not my neighbor?” Where can I draw the line, set the limit? Whom may I righteously exclude from consideration as my neighbor?

Jesus understands the real question, and his response blows it apart. He is not wasting time telling us to be chummy with our chums or to look out for the people who look out for us. His command is to cross the barriers erected to block communication, understanding, empathy, and compassion. Pity does not count because pity is degrading. So, Jesus makes the hero of his parable a righteously hated figure who goes out of his way to care for his enemy. The religious people in the parable will not help the man in distress even though the dangers are only that they might soil their own purity by touching a corpse (which for all they know he may be) or disrupt their schedules. So, they pass the victim by on the other side of the road. The Samaritan, the despised anti-hero to Jesus’ own people, the Jews, crosses not just the road but the huge invisible barriers of fear, suspicion, resentment, and contempt.

So, when Jesus concludes by saying, “Go and do likewise,” he is not just telling us to use our resources to do good for others in need – to be “good Samaritans.” He is telling us to cross the barriers that separate us from those “others” whom we don’t trust and who don’t trust us, either. For this very reason, Jesus calls us to be his disciples and, together, his church. The baby must explore and learn the world into which she has been born. We must learn two worlds – the one moving and changing all around us which God loves, and the new world of grace, mercy, and peace which God wants but which remains as yet mostly unseen. We must neither abandon the world that presently exists nor forget God’s promise of a world redeemed and healed. There’s no point ranting at the world for the way we think it should be, because it is not. Jesus meets people where they are with respect, empathy, commitment, and compassion; he does not tell them they are all wrong and leave them without love or hope. Besides, our view of the way things “should be” is tainted by our own prejudices and traditions. We need to listen to people and keep learning from them. And the world God wants runs on grace, trust, and compassion; it does not run on rules and punishments.

Jesus sends us across the barriers that divide people God loves from other people God loves also. That’s the task he has given us. “Go,” he says, “and do likewise.” Amen.