

Wesley United Methodist Church                      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
July 15, 2018  
Title: Leaving the Familiar Behind  
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10  
Mark 6:1-13

In 1940, two years after his death, Thomas Wolfe's editor published some of Wolfe's works under the title, "You Can't Go Home Again." The story is about George Webber, who had written a successful book about his hometown. When he returned home, he expected to receive a hero's welcome. Instead, he was driven out of town by his friends and family who felt betrayed by what he had written about them in his book. Shaken by their reaction, Webber left his hometown behind to go find himself.

It feels a little ironic for me to be preaching about this, since it was this congregation that sent me into ministry, so I'm just going to acknowledge that right at the beginning. But this isn't about me. This is about Jesus and his response to what happened when he returned to his hometown.

The people of his hometown didn't know what to make of him. He was already becoming well known as a teacher, healer, and miracle worker. People questioned what he was saying and doing. They were quick to point out that he was a carpenter, and the son of Mary. By the way, this may have been meant as a put down because people were usually identified by their father's name, not their mother's. They may have been pointing out the questions around his paternity.

Like George Webber, Jesus was amazed at their reaction, and their unbelief. Mark tells us that "he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them." This may be

an indication to us that our belief and openness do make a difference in what Jesus is able to do among us and for us.

In Mark's gospel, rather than this incident leading to a decrease in Jesus' ministry and mission, it sets the stage for an increase. Where George Webber needed to take time to go find himself, Jesus didn't need to go off to find himself. He knew who he was, what he was doing, and what his message was. Jesus didn't stop what he was doing; he simply went to other villages to continue his teaching.

He then called the twelve close to him and began to send them out two by two. No longer would Jesus' ministry be dependent upon his physical presence in each village or town. The limitation of what one person – even the son of God – can do had now been eliminated.

Jesus now shifts into a pursuit mode. He begins an aggressive campaign to go out where the people are, to meet them, to teach them, to give them an opportunity to experience God's power.<sup>i</sup>

Jesus cares so much about the people and about what he is doing, that he is now being aggressive about reaching out to people who have not yet heard about him; people who need to hear about the new thing happening; people who need to hear God's good news.

In Methodist circles we call this Prevenient Grace – God reaching out to us in love before we are even aware of God's love for us. Think for a second about parents preparing for the birth of a baby. Before they have even seen the baby, before they have held the baby, they are in love with the baby.

When the baby is born, the baby doesn't know how to love – the baby only knows how to receive whatever is given – and to loudly demand attention when something is needed. And yet, our hearts melt when we

hold a baby. We continue to pour out love on this child. We rejoice when the baby first begins to respond to our voice and face and first begins to smile at us. We get excited when that child starts to reach out to us, to recognize that we are the safe person, the person who makes them feel good, the person who meets their needs and we continue to pour out love on this child.

Eventually, the child starts to reciprocate, becomes old enough to begin to express a response to the love we have given to the child. In a similar way, God reaches out to us, loves us, cares for us before we can even begin to recognize God's love. This is Prevenient Grace, God's love and grace coming to us before we recognize it.

The disciples were probably a surprised and at least a little scared when Jesus told them that he was sending them out. So far, they have not done any teaching or miracles on their own. They have been assisting Jesus and learning from him by listening to him and by observing him in action. But now they are being sent out to leave what is familiar and go into the unknown.

They had already left their homes, families, and jobs to follow Jesus, but since that time, they had been with Jesus. He had been their comfort, solid place, and now they were being sent out to leave the comfortable and familiar behind. This sending out wasn't permanent. They would come back and report to Jesus. They would be together again, but right now they were being sent out to strangers and strange places.

Jesus had been modeling for them what he wanted them to do and to become. They will still need a lot of help, but even if they don't believe it, they are ready to go out and work on their own. They are ready to go out and be his representative.

On a daily basis, they would not be able to come to Jesus to ask what to do, but they would learn to rely upon what Jesus had taught them. They were also being sent out two by two. This is important because they would encourage each other when they needed it. They would pray together, talk together. When one felt down the other would help. When one felt weak, the other would help to strengthen his faith.

Even though most of our churches have someone appointed as the pastor and the pastor has some defined responsibilities, it doesn't change the fact that all of us, as Christians, are sent out to the places where we live and work to be missionaries and witnesses to God's love, to what we have seen, heard, experienced. They, and we, are sent out centered on Jesus, carrying his message to an unprepared world, to a world that may not have heard about God's love, or who have heard about God in ways that make them afraid, or make them want to have nothing to do with Christians.

Jesus gave them instructions for the journey. He told them what to take, what to do in a village, and how to respond to rejection.

He told them to take with them only what was absolutely necessary. This is still good advice for us today. When we weigh ourselves down with a desire for wealth, popularity, pride, success as the world sees it, it can be easy to lose focus. Let me be clear that there is nothing wrong with having money, or prestige or being successful at what we do. When these are part of our faith journey, they can become opportunities and tools that help us to share God's love. The danger is when we allow them to become more important than God, when we allow them to become our god. Then they can stunt our desire for God and our freedom to love and to do good. We take with us on our journey, only those things that help us to be faithful.

The disciples were given authority to do the things Jesus had been doing, to cast out unclean spirits, to heal the sick. We are also sent to do the things Jesus did. We may not cast out unclean spirits or heal the sick in the ways that Jesus did, but we can love in the way that Jesus loved. In fact, this is the way that most of us are called to be in the world – being real people, loving those whom we meet each day. Treating others with love, sharing God’s love in authentic ways may bring healing and openness that we may never know about. In our daily lives we are called to be agents of God’s prevenient grace, sharing God’s love before people are able to recognize that love.

Jesus gave the twelve instructions on what to do when they arrived in a town. They were to focus on their mission. They were to live among the people, become part of their families, part of their lives for the time that they were in the village.

Remember that Jesus had just experienced rejection in his hometown, among people he knew. He knew that they would not be welcomed with open arms everywhere they went and would experience rejection in some of the villages. There was urgency to their mission and it was important to keep moving if people did not want to listen to them. I think for us, the lesson here is that we are to stay focused on the mission. We are to stay focused on what God is calling us to be and to do.

We will never agree completely with everyone, and we need to be able to model how to disagree with each other in love; disagree while still honoring the other as a child of God. If we disagree in love we can move on with what God is calling us to do. If we allow disagreements or ridicule or arguments to weigh us down then we will find it difficult to live out God’s

love. We, too, must shake the dust off our feet – figuratively. We can ask God to help us not to let negative dust cling to us and slow us down.

Jesus taught his disciples and us by word and by example that there is power in weakness. Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians points to his weakness as witness that God is the one at work in whatever Paul did. The disciples would discover that when they felt the least confident, that was when God was able to work best. When Paul is at his weakest, God is strongest.

This is true also for us. If we wait until we are confident that we can do something, we may wait forever. If and when we finally do take action, it will be because our confidence is in ourselves rather than in God. There is a saying that God doesn't call the equipped, but God equips the called. Whatever it is that God is calling us to be and do, God will give us what we need. True power for everyday living comes in our weakness because God transforms our weakness into strength.

The early church understood that everyone who believed in Jesus was sent out into the world as Jesus was sent. The word about Jesus was spread by word of mouth. There were no books to read, and most people could not read. There was no internet, no face book, no email or telephone. Ordinary everyday life as a Christian meant being sent just like Jesus. While many things have changed, it is still true that all of us are called to follow Jesus model and to become more like Jesus in every way. Sometimes this means leaving the comfortable and familiar behind as we venture into a conversation with someone we don't know, or even with someone we do know. Sometimes it means leaving the comfortable and familiar behind when we find a way to show love to someone who needs it.

When we are uncomfortable venturing into the unknown, we can be assured that God works even in, and especially in, our weakness.

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<sup>i</sup> Abingdon Preaching Annual 2018