

Travel Well

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Third Presbyterian Church

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Mark 6:1-13

A giant of humanity died this week. His name was Harry Krueger, and we all knew him as “Doc.” He profoundly impacted the lives of my family, even changing some life trajectories. Doc was a professor of brass at Augustana University, my beloved undergraduate alma mater, and that of all three of my siblings. They all majored in instrumental music; they all studied privately with Doc throughout college; and they all played in his brass choir. For twelve out of thirteen successive years, I had a sibling who was student of Doc. As for me, I studied trumpet with him during the summers throughout high school, but ultimately gave it up after I wore braces.

Every four years, Doc would take the brass choir on tour to Europe. He knew that travel offered many gifts, and made sure his students could experience them. My brother was the first in our family to go on a European tour with Doc, which was a really big deal around our parts. Four years later, when my twin sister, Jeanette, and I were completing our sophomore year at Augustana, Doc planned another European tour. As a member of the group, Jeanette would get to go. It turns out the tour had space for other students to tag along, and Mom and Dad graciously offered that I could go, too. At first I said, no - this was my sister’s group, not mine, I didn’t want to intrude. But then I thought, “What am I, stupid?” I came to my senses and accepted their offer to travel, too. Doc welcomed me and always made me feel included, never an extra. My job would be to sell tickets at the concerts.

I was a wide-eyed 19-year-old who’d flown domestically maybe three times in my life, but I’d never prepared for a trip like this. I distinctly remember getting the packing list with the specifics of what we should take, and what we shouldn’t. Only two pairs of pants - not three. One skirt. Five shirts, not six. Taking only what we needed, and not any more, was even more important than today because these were, after all, the days before wheeled luggage! We’d be schlepping our stuff around five countries for three weeks, in and out of planes and buses and hotels and homes. We needed to travel light.

Travel, of course, was essential to Jesus’ ministry. Until the time of today’s Gospel story, Jesus had kept his disciples close to him as he ministered. Wherever they went, people were in need. They had so-called unclean spirits that weighed them down, that kept them from the abundant life God wanted for them. People needed healing; they needed freedom; they needed hope; they needed good news. Jesus brought all of that to them. And through it all, the disciples followed Jesus. Wherever he traveled, they traveled. Where he stopped, they stopped. And when he got going again, so did they. We know this, at least at an intellectual level, hopefully more.

As part of Jesus’ inner circle, they experienced all the highs of seeing healings taking hold, of throngs welcoming Jesus, of nods and applause and possibly even standing ovations for his great speeches in the synagogue.

The disciples also saw the other times, too - the rejection of the hometown boy, the cynicism, the unbelief that seemed to limit even his power. But Jesus was their guide, leading the way. He would bear the brunt of any travel hiccups. He had it all covered.

However, any good teacher knows that at some point, you have to push your students to take charge of their own learning - which is what Jesus did. “*You* go out, and *you* make other disciples. *You* go - with my authority, yes, but if you’re really serious about what I’m doing, *you* bring healing; *you* bring my Good News; *you* embody God’s love. Go out to where the people in need are. Go out to where people who lack hope are hanging out. Don’t always wait for them to come to you. Go to where *they* live and work and play.”

I think those are words for us to keep pondering. Yes, at Third Church we offer many ministries right where we are - in this building. It’s a vital part of our mission to fully employ this amazing facility for ministry. We are all in on that, 200%. At the same time, the community around us is not standing still. The areas of greatest need are not necessarily right around the corner from East and Meigs. Yes, we already do ministry outside of our walls - we tutor in schools. We’ve recently begun sending our arts and enrichment program directly to neighborhoods where under-resourced children live.

Yet we have a call from Jesus that is as big as all the needs around us. We must continue to traverse the borders of race and class and economics. We must adopt a posture of curiosity and learning. Do we know where Rochester’s food deserts are? How about job deserts? Or transportation deserts? How would that knowledge transform our ministry?

Do we have friends outside of our own social strata? Do we even ever cross into neighborhoods of extreme poverty? Or do we stick with the East End? Members of our Dining Room Ministry study team did an exercise where we took a big map of the Rochester area - the old fashioned kind that you unfold and open up. Each mapped out our daily and weekly routes to work, to shopping, to friends, or to events. When we looked at the collection of lines on the map, we were sobered when we saw the vast areas where we choose not to go.

Maybe we should think about expanding our travel itineraries.

I also wonder about the spiritual deserts in our community that we avoid. Where are the places of deep longing, of searching for meaning and connection to God? Chances are they’re in our workplace, or in our classroom, or in the house next door. Are we willing to travel, there, too?

It’s good to remember that when Jesus brought healing, he healed the whole person, not just their physical ailments. He healed their bodies and spirits; he brought them back into community with one another and with God.

When it comes to matters of spirituality, so often we carry a lot of baggage, and many of the pieces carry the brand name “Fear.” We who call ourselves progressive Christians carry so much baggage around Jesus’ call to share God’s good news in words. Michael Lindvall is right: “God-talk outside the walls of the church makes many Christians anxious.” Rightfully, we don’t want to be pushy or offensive, especially as so much injustice and discrimination is wrongly perpetuated in the name of Christianity. Some in this place have been on the receiving end of that offensiveness. But the heavy baggage we carry concerning what I call “bad evangelism” means we avoid traveling that road at all.

I wonder what possibilities would emerge if we took Jesus' words to heart, and shed some of that baggage? After all, he did say, "Travel light. Take only what you need to get to where I send you, and nothing more - You can take a walking stick and some good walking shoes to get there. But that's it. You don't get to rely on yourself. You're going to have to rely on others, even strangers, even me. You may get the door slammed in your face. But go anyway. Go where I send you. Go, and tell, and live."

The Gospel's claim on our lives is indeed personal, but it's not meant to remain private. While it's not our job to convert people to our way of belief, it is our call to tell our stories of how we have experienced God at work in our lives and in the world around us. Writes Lindvall, "This text insists that, in spite of the potential for rejection (or at least anxiety or embarrassment), telling the story with words is part of the claim that Christ lays upon his disciples." It requires "integrity between word and deed," he says, and simply telling others "about the God who has come to mean so much to us," from the heart, in our own words, and without shame.¹

One of the things Doc included on our packing list was a travel journal. He encouraged each of us to document our experience. I pulled that journal out the other day - a blue spiral-bound notebook with a Berlin travel sticker on it. Berlin was our second stop on the tour, and it was several years before the Berlin Wall came down. Having experienced both sides of the Wall - west, and east, in Berlin, we continued on to Leipzig in what was still Communist East Germany. In my travel journal, I wrote how, other than St. Thomas Church where so much of Bach's music ministry took place, the whole city felt negative, desolate, even creepy. It felt like we were being watched, even stared at. Maybe our rooms were bugged, we thought. There was a strange man who walked into the hotel room of one musician. And the food was atrocious. I wrote that I didn't like it at all. I didn't like the place. I wasn't keen on the people.

In Leipzig was a small Lutheran seminary. Doc himself was Lutheran, a person of deep faith, and Augustana is also a Lutheran college. Through another professor's connection to one of the Leipzig seminary faculty, Doc arranged for the brass choir to give a concert for the theology students. But there was the small detail that we had a mandatory state-sponsored tour guide, and this little excursion was not officially sanctioned. So our group of 30 or so could not not leave en masse, lest we draw any attention to ourselves. We had to leave our drab, dumpy hotel to walk to the seminary in twos and threes, at staggered times.

After the concert, in this place where we were not supposed to be, we got to stay afterwards and talk to the East German students for a long time. They told us about their frustrations; how it was difficult to get visas to travel outside of the communist bloc; how they could say what they wanted within the confines of the seminary, but outside of it, they couldn't freely speak; how they were fed propaganda, and even when they learned English it was all politically-based conversation and translation.

They said they'd been eagerly waiting for two months for us to come - to bring some light into their lives, some hope for change, and newness. It couldn't have happened in this particular way if we had not been sent there - by Doc, and possibly even by God. I'm not one to say I have the inside scoop on God's mind, nor do I see God as a cosmic puppeteer. But as a person of faith, I

¹ Michael Lindvall, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 3*, p. 216.

have to hold out the possibility that God might have had something to do with sending us to this city that felt strange and foreboding and until that evening, unwelcoming.

But more than that, the experience changed me. I no longer saw the East German people as “other;” they became human to me. Their experience of systemic oppression opened my eyes; their deep longings touched my soul profoundly; they gave me hope. I wonder if that’s one of the reasons why Jesus sent his disciples out on their own into the villages to carry on his mission - so that *they* would be changed. Undoubtedly, other people needed transformation. The Gospel says that.

And... so do we. Curt Kruschwitz writes, “Time after time, God uses engagement with the world as a catalyst for spiritual growth among God’s people...By engaging in God’s mission, [people]” develop a deeper understanding of God, the world, and their calling in it.²

That’s the gist of Mark’s story, I think - to give and receive, to heal and be healed, to tell and to listen. By all means, we should travel light. But also, by crossing new borders, by building relationships, by sharing from the heart, we will also travel well.

Amen.

² Curt Kruschwitz, “Planning Mission Trips that Matter,” in *Traveling Well*, from *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, Baylor University, p. 50-51.