

Sheltering Mercy

A Morning Message for Worship on the Second Sunday of Lent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
February 21, 2016
Text: Luke 9:1-6

This morning's text from Luke is another of those Bible stories we sort of remember but don't really pay all that much attention to. After all, we think, it doesn't really have anything to do with *my* life. Jesus isn't sending me out anywhere to preach and teach and heal. Besides, we think, it's wasn't that big of a stretch for the disciples to go out to do ministry for Jesus and take nothing with them since they didn't have that much to begin with! They were already poor! So, this is a nice story, we think, but it's just a story. It doesn't really connect with me.

That's true, to a point. Jesus isn't standing here in front of us saying, "go out and proclaim the kingdom of God and heal people." He has not, so far as I know, endowed any of us with miraculous powers to heal illness or solve problems for people as he did for the twelve. And he certainly isn't standing here telling us to go out and do any of this taking only the clothes on our backs, relying on the kindness of strangers for all of our needs for our time of ministry! But can you imagine what we'd do if he did? "What about my cell phone and my Ipad?" we'd say. What about my family and my job and my house? What about my cat or my dog or my goldfish? I can't do that, Jesus. I have responsibilities!

I have people and situations I have to worry about! I have a life for heaven's sake! I can't just walk away from all that to proclaim the kingdom of God and heal people!

I'm sure the disciples, poor as they were, had exactly the same reaction since they had lives and families and jobs and responsibilities too. One difference, though, between them and us is that they had already taken a break from those responsibilities to follow Jesus in the first place. They had already recognized something extraordinary in Jesus and made the decision to spend the time to learn what it was he was advocating since it seemed to answer so many of the worries and concerns they had for the wellbeing of those very families they had left behind. So, they had banded together, these twelve along with Jesus, and they traveled the countryside with him as he taught and healed the people. They lived from day to day, relying on the kindness of strangers and the generosity of wealthy patrons. Over time this life, though never stable in a conventional sense, came to offer a certain level of comfort and predictability. Then one day Jesus realizes it was time to upset the applecart and he gives them their marching orders in the story we read this morning. In a real way, he wasn't asking them to do anything they weren't already doing with him. They were already living day to day on the move from town to town. But, they had done all this together with Jesus at the center. Now, he was telling them it was time to try doing it alone.

“Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money – not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there.”

Whoa, hold it right there. Take nothing for your journey? That right there puts me into a panic. I admit it, I like to look good when I travel. I’ve been known to take an extra suitcase just for shoes, even when I’m going to ministry conferences! I mean, you never know what you’re going to need in the moment, right? No, Jesus says to the disciples. This is NOT about you. It’s about God and the work God needs you to do. It’s about stepping out in faith trusting that God will provide what you need to do what God needs you to do. It’s put up or shut up time, Jesus is telling the disciples. And truth be told, he says the same thing to us more often that we realize.

Dear friends, contrary to what we have tried to convince ourselves, this story is not just an ancient tale of ideal behavior on the part of saints we can never hope to imitate. This kind of selfless response to God’s invitations to real people is still happening today. When the RI Conference UCC Haiti Missions group travels to Haiti, team members take as few personal items as they can possibly get by with since the vast majority of their suitcase space is used for transporting much needed medical and school supplies and equipment. Doctors and nurses working with the organization Doctors Without Borders who are often right in

the thick of the worst humanitarian disasters in the world – like the war in Syria and the refugee crisis in Turkey – live in the same conditions as the people they are trying to help. The disaster relief teams that Church World Service deploys in the wake of earthquakes and tsunamis often take only one large duffel to live out of for weeks or even months. Take nothing for your journey are words that still echo in the hearts and minds of people today and the question becomes, then, how is God calling each of us to live into this challenge from our own realities?

This is a real question and I am the first to admit it is a tough one to answer because we do have busy, full lives already with responsibilities as well as limitations not to mention people who count on us. The thing is, Jesus knows that. Jesus is not asking you to walk away from anything to set out on some door to door bell ringing campaign. That's not what this is about. Jesus is asking each of us to loosen our grasp on all the things in life each day that we want to control, all that we want to formulate answers for ourselves, all the security we want to create for ourselves. Jesus wants us to do what he asked the disciples to do at its most basic – let go and let God. Let go of your worries and your fears and let God show you that still more excellent way Paul writes about so beautifully. Let go of all the reasons you can come up with not to do something and search for what you need to answer God's invitation with "Okay, I'll try," instead. Let go of who you

think you're supposed to be and let God show you what God needs you to be instead.

Now this is not easy and not for the faint of heart. I know this. You know this. And we all know most of us can't do anything very dramatic or totally life changing. But some people can and do and these are the people who lead transformative lives that shine a light for the rest of us to follow as best we can. One of the best contemporary examples of this is Mother Benedict Duss, OSB. She is the foundress of the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, CT, my favorite place to go on retreat. Mother Benedict and her friend and fellow Benedictine nun Mother Mary Aline arrived in this country from France aboard the steamship *SS Argentina* on August 31, 1946. Though born a citizen of the United States, Mother Benedict had lived most of her life in France where she had studied to become a doctor and then made the decision to enter a Benedictine order of the strict observance in Jouarre, France. Mother Benedict lived through the horrors of WWII, having to spend months at a time hiding in the attic of her convent when it was occupied by the Germans. As an American, she would have been arrested on sight or even killed not to mention putting the rest of the sisters in jeopardy. But from her hiding place in the attic she was the first to see the liberating army led by General George S. Patton coming down the road to the convent. She spoke of knowing in that instant as she saw the

American flag fluttering in the wind over his staff car that she would have to come back to the United States to start a Benedictine foundation there, bringing the unique experience of this Benedictine tradition to her homeland.

Mother Benedict had incredible obstacles to overcome in the immediate aftermath of WWII to live her dream, what she knew was her call from God, into reality. But she did, ticking them off one at a time, refusing to be deterred no matter what she had to do. At last, she and Mother Mary Aline were standing on the dock in New York City waiting to be met by the person she thought would be helping them to get established. They did meet the woman and the artist friend she had brought along simply because the other woman, Lauren Ford, knew the city better than she did. The two ladies insisted on taking the sisters out for a fancy lunch but when the bill came, they realized they had no money to pay. So Mother Benedict took out \$50, all the money she and Mother Mary Aline had between them, and paid the bill. This left them with the grand total of \$7.53 to start their foundation in the United States.

Fearful and discouraged but undeterred because Mother Benedict trusted God would provide, the sisters moved forward with their dream. And God did provide. They ended up going back to CT with Lauren Ford and living with her in her home as their dreams slowly took shape. Today the Abbey of Regina Laudis

sits on 400+ acres of beautiful rolling farmland in Bethlehem, CT. 45 nuns call the Abbey Home along with dozens of oblates and one of the premier summer stock theatres in CT, The Gary The Olivia Theatre. The Abbey has a thriving art shop and an award winning dairy boasting their very own brand of cheese. All from \$7.53. These sisters stepped out in faith exactly like Jesus instructed the disciples to do, literally building a foundation of faith that influences the lives of thousands of people around the world, myself included. Their faith is a light for us all revealing what can happen when faith, trust and action intersect.

Those long ago instructions Jesus gave the disciples still echo across the millennia to us. Take only the clothes on your back reminded the disciples and reminds us of those who have only the clothes on their backs. This is why the third physical act of mercy is to clothe the naked. This is why donating to our underwear drive for children at the request of the schools is more than just something nice to do. It's answering a command from God. Similarly, "whatever house you enter, stay there" reminded the disciples and reminds us of those whose only home is a homeless shelter on the nights when a bed is available. It reminds us that the problem of homelessness is everyone's problem, especially those who have homes to enjoy each night. That's why the fourth physical act of mercy is to shelter the homeless.

The spiritual acts of mercy related to these two physical ones may seem a little more difficult to connect to clothing and shelter: Counseling the doubtful and comforting the sorrowful. But not if you've served a meal or handed out clothing at Mathewson Street Church in Providence during the Friendship Breakfast on Sunday mornings. A big focus of that breakfast and the one that makes it unique among outreach efforts to the homeless and near homeless is that it does put the emphasis on interpersonal connections between those who have and those who have not. On both of our Mission Trips these past two years those of us who have experienced the Friendship Breakfast know that we have counseled the doubtful and comforted the sorrowful as we poke with the homeless we met there. We heard their stories and held their doubts and their sorrows with them. We have carried those stories and all the doubts and sorrows they contained in our hearts since then and have allowed ourselves to be transformed by them. We have shared those stories, those experiences, those realities with you opening the door for your transformation as well. In doing so we have been, I think, sheltering mercy in our midst in a world seemingly intent on destroying it. How we continue to do that must be a core part of our discernment about how this church is to grow and thrive in the future. How is God calling us to be a place for sheltering mercy and sharing it with the world? May God show us the way. Amen.