

## ***On the Road Again***

A Message for Worship on Sunday Morning with Communion  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
February 4, 2018  
Text: Mark 1:35-39

*“On the road again,  
I can’t wait to get on the road again  
The life I love is makin’ music with my friends  
And I can’t wait to get on the road again...”*

Remember this song? Recorded by Willie Nelson and released in August of 1980, this song has gone on to be one of Willie Nelson’s most recognizable hits. He wrote it for the soundtrack of a movie, *Honeysuckle Rose*, after being approached by the film’s producer while they were on a flight together. Legend has it that Nelson finished the lyrics before the plane landed, writing them on the back of the barf bag in his seat pocket on the plane. The producer had asked him to write a song about what it was like to be on the road touring as a musician and that was that. Nelson also had the tune in his head and soon put the lyrics and melody together in the song we know so well today.

This is one of those songs we all know, one of the ones we can sing along with when it comes on the radio. It so perfectly describes what it’s like to be on a road trip, that quintessentially American experience of just traveling on the road, seeing sights and doing what we love to do with the people we love. It’s a happy song and it makes us happy to listen to it, to sing along with it.

So, perhaps it's no surprise that when I was reading through this morning's text from the Gospel of Mark describing Jesus hitting the road with his disciples, I could almost hear one of them singing this song.

Now of course they didn't. They couldn't have since Willie Nelson wouldn't even be born for another 2000 years! But, gosh, doesn't it seem like they should be singing this song, or some song, as they embark on what would be a two year journey on the road, with Jesus teaching, preaching and healing all along the way. The disciples were like his roadies, after all. They accompanied him on the road, following him from the very beginning, taking care of all the little details of their traveling lifestyle. Why did they do this? Because he asked them to.

Just a few verses earlier in Mark, the scene is described. Jesus is walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and he came upon two brothers – Simon and Andrew who were fishermen. He said to them, “follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And, Mark says, “immediately they left their nets and followed him.” Immediately they followed him, leaving behind their livelihoods and families. They followed him the first time he asked and they followed him again and again. They were there, front and center, as he was healing people, preaching the kingdom of God, teaching what it all meant. The disciples were right there, in the midst of all those people, hanging on every word he said.

“On the road again. The life I love is makin’ music with my friends and I can’t wait to get on the road again.” This was the life of Jesus and the disciples as they toured around Galilee and the start of that tour is in the text we read this morning. This describes the moment when the reality of this prolonged road trip kicked off in earnest. But it didn’t begin with a song, or a stop to load up on provisions or water for the journey ahead. Instead, this brief story begins with a description of Jesus going off by himself in the dark to pray. This is no surprise. If you look at the verses just before this, you can see that Jesus has been going non-stop since he got back from the desert after his baptism. He rounded up some disciples. He was teaching and healing and casting out demons. He even healed Simon’s mother-in-law who was ill. Then, the text says, he continued to heal folks from the crowd who gathered around him. Finally, the crowds dwindled and he was able to get some rest. But he soon was back up, heading out into the hills to grab some quiet time by himself to pray.

I totally get that Jesus had to find some quiet time by himself to reconnect with his own spirit, and more importantly, with God. It was because of God he was doing all of this healing and teaching and preaching. It was because of God that he left whatever his quiet life had been before, perhaps as a carpenter since that had been his father’s profession. It was because of

God that he made his way to the River Jordan to be baptized by John. It was because of God that he went off into the wilderness to ponder just exactly what he was supposed to do. It was God who informed every moment of every day for Jesus. So, on this day when the journey God had in mind for him began, Jesus knew he had to make time for God. He knew he had to find a way to reconnect with God in the midst of all he was doing for God. Even Jesus had to figure out how to cram everything that needed doing into one day. Even Jesus got overwhelmed. And, when he did, he knew the only thing that mattered was reconnecting with God to make sense of it all. That's what he was doing as this story begins.

But to really understand the whole story going on here we have to look at the disciples. They had to go looking for Jesus. They got up and he wasn't there. I'm thinking that freaked them out. They had walked away from their jobs and their families to follow him. They had just spent a whole day watching him healing people of all kinds of stuff. They had watched him change people's lives and they had gone to bed excited to be a part of whatever Jesus had in mind. Then, they woke up and he was gone. Just gone. Don't you think that perhaps they were afraid he had just bugged out? That he had realized the enormity of the need he had unleashed and it scared him so he took off? I bet they did, at least for a few minutes. But, to their credit, they

went to look for him. And they found him, by himself in the hills, praying. Sitting in silence with God, watching the sun come up.

Notice what they say when they find him: “everyone is searching for you.” In other words, they confronted Jesus with the fact that people were worried about him. People were afraid he had just left, running away like everyone else did when they got so overwhelmed by the unending need of the people who were sick and struggling to survive under the cruel Roman empire. In fact, I think they went searching for him half expecting not to find him. But they did. And what did he say when they found him? He didn’t apologize for scaring them. He didn’t make any excuses at all. He didn’t even acknowledge their fears. He just said, “let us go on to the neighboring towns so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came to do.” Let’s get going, Jesus said. I have work to do, and so do you. Time to get on the road again. And they did.

Two things I think we need to take away from this story. One is the extraordinary faith of the disciples. They knew there was something very special, very unique about Jesus. They knew just being with him, learning from him, being some small part of everything he was doing, was the most important thing they would ever do in their lives. They just knew it. Even when they panicked in those pre-dawn hours because they didn’t know where he was, they wouldn’t let go of what they knew to be his

mission and now theirs. They went and found him, and in so doing, they got him going on the road again. They gave him the support, the kick in the pants, he needed to get moving again. Through this simple act of searching for him, they reminded him that he needed them as much as they needed him.

The second thing we need to take away from this story is how central prayer was to Jesus and everything he was doing. Jesus literally could not do what he did every day without reconnecting deeply and intentionally with God. This means he knew that the power to do what he was doing – healing, preaching, teaching – all of it came from God and was powered by God for God’s purposes. We tend to gloss over this reality when we think too much about Jesus as the “Son of God.” We tend to skim over how grounding prayer was to Jesus in everything he did. Prayer was like air to Jesus. His acts of healing were all done with prayer. His teaching and preaching was about understanding God and God’s expectations of people so that when they prayed to God they knew intimately to whom it was they were praying. Everything Jesus did was bookended by and drenched in prayer.

This is because Jesus knew it was only through prayer that he remained connected to God and able to focus on God’s work to be done. This is because Jesus knew he needed to remind himself all the time that it was truly God’s will to be done, and not his. This is because Jesus needed the strength, the calmness,

and the confidence that prayer restored in him when the enormity of the task in front of him became overwhelming. Friends, the human Jesus knew what it was to feel drained and at the end of his patience and knowing there was yet more to do. How could he possibly be up to such an enormous task? How can we face the at times overwhelming challenges of our lives each day? Just like Jesus – by the grace of God, always and only.

So, as you head out into your week – getting “on the road again” in your own unique way -- I hope you will pause to consider Jesus and the disciples hitting the road in their response to God each day. I hope you will remember the excitement of the disciples for the work to be done with Jesus. And I hope you will remember that these simple folk, people just like you and me, got him going again when he was feeling overwhelmed. And I want you to hold on to the fact that even Jesus got overwhelmed sometimes. Even Jesus had to make time to pray. Even Jesus had moments when he wasn't sure just what to do, but he knew that God would never abandon him. Most of all, I urge you to grab hold of Jesus' secret tonic for whatever ailed him, or any of the people who came to him for help and healing. That secret tonic was God, made real and personal through heartfelt prayer. Prayer is what carried Jesus and the disciples on the road again every time. And guess what? It will work for you too. Try it, then, hit the road again. Amen.