

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham

“On the Road Again...and Again”

The Rev. Dr. John Judson

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Luke 9:57-62

Genesis 12:1-9

I was always a bit jealous. Every month during my growing up years my father got to fly away and travel for business to far away exotic places. He got to go to Calgary, Los Angeles, Denver and San Francisco. He got to stay in hotels and eat out...you have to understand that we never ate out as a family. He got to collect those tiny bottles of shampoo and lotion. It seemed such an adventurous sort of life. It wasn't long after getting into ministry that I too began to travel for presbytery and synod work. Driving or flying to such exotic locations as Dallas, Little Rock and El Paso it soon dawned on me that there was nothing real glamorous about this. A couple of years ago I shared my childhood impressions of my father's travels with him. At first I think he thought I was kidding, but then he said, “John, when you have seen the inside of one hotel you have seen the inside of every hotel. I went because I had to and I could not wait to get back home and sleep in my own bed with your mom.” I have to say I agreed with him...there is something about coming home to the comfortable and familiar. In fact how many of you have said after traveling, “I can't wait to sleep in my own bed.”?

With that in mind I want to ask a second question. How many of you have every said, after having traveled overseas, “I can't wait to get back to the good old USA.”? It is wonderful to travel to foreign ports of call, or to live overseas for a while, but there comes a moment when you want people to understand your language, your idioms and your sense of humor. We want to return to what is comfortable and familiar. In a sense this is where we can begin to connect with the people Jesus encounters in our morning's stories. Just as we are comfortable in our own culture, they were comfortable in theirs. Second Temple Judaism was a very particular culture which was distinct from the cultures around it. They had particular ways of living together, worshipping together and being Jewish. They had deeply ingrained customs which stretched back more than a thousand years which means they had practiced being who they were for more almost five times as long as this nation has been in existence. So we might imagine how shocking and difficult it would be for someone to propose that the people leave behind some of their most cherished customs and live in a new and different way. However that is what Jesus was proposing.

Granted this part of Luke's story does not begin that way. It gets under way with a rather innocuous conversation in which someone says to Jesus, “I will follow you anywhere.” Jesus responds, as he often does, with a cryptic sort of statement about foxes and birds having homes while Jesus, as the Son of Man does not. In order to help us get a handle on this strange response Luke offers us two more mini-conversations. The first is someone wanting to bury his dead father before following Jesus. The second is about someone wanting to say goodbye to his or her

family before following. In each case Jesus tells them that following him is more important than either of those actions. While those statements might appear to be shocking to us, they were far more shocking to Jesus' audience. They were shocking because one of, if not the most sacred obligation of a Jew, was to bury one's father. A second sacred obligation was the care of one's family. Jesus was swimming upstream against more than a thousand years of cultural training by asking people to interact with the world in an entirely new way. The image Luke is offering us by combining these stories is that to follow Jesus meant that individuals would no longer have a cultural home base in which they felt completely comfortable. Following Jesus meant to be always on the road, to be a citizen of God's kingdom and never a full-fledged citizen of any other time and place. Thus every cultural assumption and tradition had to be held up to the light of the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth to see if it was worth keeping or if needed changing.

My guess is that this is where I am about to lose some of you. I am about to lose you because the same command of Jesus applies to us. We are supposed to be on the road with Jesus as well. We are supposed to be citizens of God's kingdom rather than of this culture, meaning we are never to be completely comfortable in our current cultural skin. We are to see ourselves as travelers who are always looking for a home that we can never quite find here. Now let me be clear...this is not some pie in the sky, heaven is the only place where we ought to feel at home sort of idea. This is not pietistic escapism. This is about the here and now where we find ourselves every day. And so I am probably losing some of you because, well, you like it here. This culture is our home. We feel comfortable here. We know how things work. We know how to make our way in this world. We like the customs and traditions we have inherited. The thought then of having to live as an outsider constantly examining the world around us is a bit more than you or I can bear, and I get that. I like it here too. I would like nothing better than to say, isn't this great and just sort of ease into the great easy chair of life. So before I lose you, I want offer a different way of seeing this command of Jesus to be on the road.

I want to begin by going back to my father. My dad always believed that if you were going to do something you ought to do it right. You took your time. You planned out what you were going to do and then you carefully carried out the plan. You did not settle for a second rate product. God approaches releasing, renewing and restoring of the world in the same way. God has a vision for the way this world and God is not going to settle for a second rate world. And since we are God's co-workers in the process of making the world that kind of a place we are not to settle for second rate either. We are not to settle for a culture that is not becoming what God would have it to be. And in order to help our culture become that kind of culture we need to be those who bring a critical kingdom eye to the practices and potentials of the culture in which we live. We are to be those who live in the culture but are never completely comfortable with it...we are never to ultimately have a home here where we can lay our heads and pretend that we have arrived at perfection. This means that we are not to settle for second rate at our places of work, in our schools, in our homes or in our communities. We are not to be satisfied with things as they are when we have a vision for how God wants them to be.