

From the Community Pulpit

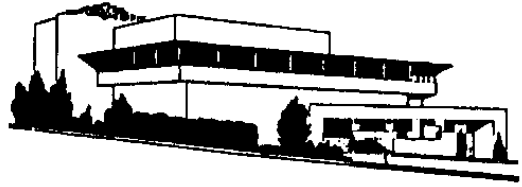
"Lessons Learned:

Reflections on the Journey"

Text: Luke 9:51-62

Sermon by Rev. Melissa St. Clair

Sunday, June 27, 2010 - 8:30 am, 9:20 am, & 10:45 am



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Compared to the 25 years of Bob Hill's ministry we just celebrated, 2 years seems like a drop in the bucket. And it is really. We have shared together in ministry for a virtual blip in the history of Community Christian Church's life of faith, and yet it has been a fruitful time, a time of mutual learning and growth and guidance, and for that I'm deeply grateful.

As I came to the realization that I am fast approaching my third move in five years – all to Missouri destinations (who would've thought? not this PA gal...) – our time over the past few weeks in Luke's gospel has been a reminder that Jesus himself was always on the move.

Well, sort of.

While Jesus did travel considerably throughout his ministry, the author of Luke's gospel likely wasn't writing a travelogue of Jesus' literal travels from point A to point B. Rather, Luke uses the motif of journey as a way to tell Jesus' story.

Today, we find Jesus at the point where he's realizing that his ministry is drawing to a close. "When the days drew near for him to be taken up" is a reference to his ascension, which will, of course, be preceded by his death and resurrection to new life. His resolve to go to Jerusalem indicates that he knows what is to come. But just because the way is known, doesn't mean it will be easy or that there aren't lessons to be learned along the way.

Kevin has drawn upon Robert Fulghum's *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in*

Kindergarten many times in his sermons and communion invitations and offering invitations. It's a fantastic resource that captures a lot of life's basic truths that really we've known all along – or at least since kindergarten. While so much of our lives can indeed be understood best when expressed most simply, there are times when we strive to build upon those basic truths, as Kevin has also challenged us to do, particularly we find ourselves wrestling with difficult issues. Jesus' words to his followers here are challenging to be sure, and yet they offer us some powerful lessons that not only reflect upon our experiences as clergy residents quite well but that also offer guidance for all of us who consider ourselves to be on a journey.

Maybe someday Kevin and I will be the authors of *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in my Clergy Residency*. I think Chalice Press would get behind that, don't you? There would probably be some sequels to that, of course, but there's no doubt that our two years here have been brimming with opportunities for learning, growth, and reflection. But until that first volume is published, some reflections on our journey through the lens' of Jesus' and his disciples' own:

Lesson Learned #1: Have good people to represent you.

From the time we entered into the search and call process with Community, the importance of this became clear. I can distinctly remember the night I was on the

way back to Eden's campus with Michael Kinnamon and a few other students following a banquet celebrating ecumenism and interfaith relations. Although it was still the fall, Michael was asking us about what was coming up next as graduation approached in the spring. I told him about the residency program and how I was really, really hoping to be a part of it. Even though there were no UCC churches that openings in their programs, I was excited and encouraged by Community Christian Church in Kansas City because they were open to the possibility of a UCC candidate. Michael shared in my excitement and told that he'd be happy to be a reference for me. Bingo! One of the most prominent Disciples there is, having served as dean of Lexington Theo for 10 years and having just been called to be the ninth General Secretary of the National Council of Churches – that's someone you want to have to send ahead of you.

As Kevin and I entered into the process of search and call this winter in anticipation of our ministries here wrapping up this summer, we were blessed to have Bob Hill as our biggest advocate. Having one of our denomination's best-known and most well-respected ministers advocating for you goes a long, long way. Thank you, Bob, for the countless phone conversations you had with a slew of individuals and committees, always glowing with enthusiasm and confidence in Kevin and me. Particularly for churches who had never called a woman before, which was the majority of the churches I interviewed with, Bob's endorsement was wise of me to gain and invaluable to me for him to share.

Jesus knows the territory he's about to enter. He knows that Samaria is not a place where people like him – Jews – are welcomed. So he sends messengers ahead of him. This doesn't work out so well. Jesus is a fitting companion for any minister going through

the search and call process, because he too is familiar with rejection. This isn't Jesus' first rejection either. Remember the welcome in his hometown? I would imagine not, because there wasn't one. He was rejected there too. Whether we find ourselves being turned down or turned away because of our ethnicity, our gender, our age, our orientation, our beliefs, our race, our socioeconomic status, we are not alone. Jesus has been there, done that... he surrounds himself with people he loves and he presses on.

Lesson Learned #2: It's not always a bad idea to ask before you act.

Bob's maxim throughout our ministry at Community has been "minimum protection, maximum support." In other words, neither he nor Tom nor Donna were here to hold our hands as we began our first full-time pastoral ministries. But they were always open and available when we had questions or concerns or weren't sure about what to do in a particular situation. With over one hundred years of ministry experience between them, there was no shortage of wisdom to be sure. So while there were times when it was best for us just to jump in and learn by doing, there were times when we were the wiser for consulting first, acting second. Of course, there were times when we asked and didn't agree with the response we were given...but that was a learning too.

When you're surrounded with competent, passionate, and experienced people, you yourself are the wiser for hearing their counsel. At Community that circle of people is drawn wide – we're blessed to have a staff that includes volunteers with a wealth of experience, like Rev. Jerry Porter, a longtime Disciples minister who in his retirement serves as our Minister of Outreach; like Dr. George

Flanagan, a gift from the Baptist church who shares his gifts with the Center for Practical Bioethics as well as Community through his role as Chaplain of Spiritual Care, teaching a Sunday School class and working faithfully with our Elders, and preaching on the occasional Wednesday night. There are countless others as well...because our entire staff views their work here as a ministry and because you yourselves embrace your role as ministers, which is a blessing not only to this community of faith but to the broader community as well.

James and John aren't really sure how to handle the rejection they face at Samaria. They're angry, of course, and as I learned at the Gamaliel Foundation's National Leadership Training, and as our Core Team for MORE2 is well aware, anger is an appropriate response to a violated value. Anger itself isn't inherently BAD. It's how we handle it that becomes key. James and John are ready to pull out the big guns – and using violence-laced slang isn't inappropriate here because their knee-jerk response is just that – violent. Invoking fire to consume your enemies isn't recommended at home, kids, and neither does Jesus endorse it. He settles them down and puts them in their place. Jesus ministry is about nothing if it's not about making peace and including even one's enemies, not making bonfires out of them. Worth noting for our ministries as well. Good thing they asked first.

Lesson Learned #3: Be eager.

And it's corollary –

Lesson Learned #4: Be ready to sacrifice.

I can't tell you how many times I talked to Kevin before he arrived in which he tried convince that I would have everything all worked out before he arrived and he could just hit the ground running. Well, running is a great metaphor for the pace of life at

Community, and I quickly learned that if in the beginning it seems like you're not doing a whole lot, wait a week. The more things we jumped into with both feet, the more experiences we had, the more we learned, the more we grew. Leading a mission trip within the first month. Visiting long-time members who were dying. Planning youth and young adult outings. Leading worship. Preaching. Driving the bus. Teaching. Jumping on board with any number of the great ideas and opportunities Bob put before us. I can remember Kevin expressing to me one afternoon as we were running around Loose Park his concern that if we turned down an opportunity to do something on our day off, that we wouldn't be asked again and future opportunities would be lost. I assured him that we had to learn to say no. A few weeks later, I was the one having to navigate the tricky boundary waters, and it was Kevin who was reminding me that it was okay to say "no" sometimes. Mutual accountability is a good thing.

The enthusiasm that you all have for ministry makes it easy to get excited, however. Your commitment to outreach, your conviction for social justice, your compassion for congregational care, your enthusiasm for evangelism, your eyes and ears for the arts, your fervor for fellowship – it's contagious and inspiring! Seeing how generously you give of your time and resources, seeing the sacrifices that you make not only builds the kingdom – but it builds a sense of commitment in those around you, it encourages others to use their gifts because they see how fulfilling it is for you to be using your gifts, and it gives those of us engaged in full-time ministry a sense of hope for the future of the church and God's kingdom on this earth.

This is a tough part. Jesus makes it clear that in his role as the Son of Man, he is at the

mercy of nature. The implication? That those who follow him will find themselves in that position too. For most of us, it can be difficult for us to imagine literally living like animals, with no place to lay our heads. And yet perhaps it's not so difficult for us to imagine what it would be like to eschew our material desires so that we might give more to others; to take a chance when in conversation in mixed company or even amongst friends to say what it is we truly believe on an issue of faith or justice; to reprioritize our schedules so that we can make Monday night at Micah Ministry or spend a few hours in the food pantry or attend Sunday or Wednesday services regularly or join the Kerygma bible study in the fall.

Lesson Learned #5: Trust that farewell is not goodbye.

Jesus makes it clear that the call of discipleship must be put ahead of all other duties – including care for ones' family and care for the dead, which was highly important in Jewish custom. But what makes Jesus' claim so radical in these verses isn't that his followers must leave everything else behind – it's that Jesus doesn't ask us to follow him over the evil forces in the world, over the worst of human relationships. No – he asks us to choose a way of life that emulates him over the BEST of human relationships – the relationship we have with those we know as family. That's a big calling, and yet, as Fred Craddock points out, the remarkable thing about those who have chosen faith over family is that they find themselves freed from possession and worship of family and in doing so they find the distance necessary to love them.

I have been abundantly blessed to have a biological family who loves me very much – so much in fact that they've long since realized that I'm going to follow my call, even if that means continuing to move farther

away from them. It's not been easy for them and it's not always been easy for me. But having physical distance between you and your family isn't necessarily what Jesus is prescribing. Rather, it's the notion that we can separate ourselves from our family of origin for the sake of the ministry we are called to do whether it's in our hometown or in another country. In doing so, we can find ourselves smack-dab in the middle of a new family, a family that challenges us, embraces us, holds us accountable, loves us, nurtures us, reminds of us of who God is calling us to be.

When we draw the circle wide, we discover that we need not say farewell, as Jesus forbids those who wish to follow him in this passage. Rather, we trust that although our relationships may change as we commit to going where God leads, we still remain sisters and brothers in Christ. As I transition to my call as senior minister at First Christian Church in Republic, MO, I will no longer be one of your pastors. That relationship will change. But I will be most delighted and proud to call you my sisters and brothers in Christ, and to know that even when I'm in a new place, that the ministry in this place is alive and well, striving for the same purposes First Christian Church is – to bring about God's kingdom on this earth through embodying the preaching and teachings and love of Jesus Christ.

Thank you, brothers and sisters.

I love you.

God loves you.

There's nothing we can do without it.