

*Traveling with Jesus sermon series*

*“Crossing Over to the Other Side”*

[Luke 8:22](#)

“Why do Methodist ministers move so frequently? Isn’t it a waste to move just as you are finally getting to know your congregation?” This is what a Presbyterian clergyperson asked me a few years ago. He continued by saying, “In my denomination, the first 5 years are considered a time of learning about your people and building relationship with them. The 6th year, that is when real ministry starts.”

It is true that Methodist pastors tend to move more often than non-Methodist clergy. Actually, in the past, most Methodist pastors moved every 1 to 3 years. And, for many years, the common practice was for pastors to not even know if they were moving or not until the pastoral appointments were read at Annual Conference!

Nowadays, the process is more humane, as pastors and churches are consulted in order to take into account specific personal and missional needs. And also, pastors are encouraged to stay in their appointments at least for 5 years, or as long as they can for the sake of the stability of the local church. However, all appointments in the United Methodist Church are still made for one year at a time.

This mobility of Methodist ministers, called itinerancy, was a feature at the very beginning of Methodism. Our founder, John Wesley, believed that if a pastor stayed in one place too long, he would form deep attachments to the people he served, which could compromise his effectiveness for ministry.

So, Methodist preachers, called Circuit Riders, traveled on horses from town to town, spreading the Methodist movement. Traveling light and fast, they found new people and founded new churches. But, they never stayed long in one place. They kept moving forward, leaving the ministries of the church in the hands of the laity.

Later, as the Methodist church grew into a more stable institution, we changed our system. Preachers were appointed to particular churches. The clergy no longer had to travel all the time, and the laity no longer had to share their pastors with other churches. However, the concern remained that pastors might become too comfortable if they stayed in their charges for too long. So, to keep the spirit of movement alive in the life of the church, bishops moved their pastors frequently.

It’s incredible that Methodist pastors and their families obediently moved every 1-3 years, with many of the moves coming every year. My father was a Methodist pastor, so my family moved many times throughout his ministry of over 40 years. Because of the itinerancy system, I ended up attending 4 elementary schools and two junior high schools. We moved around during my high school years, too, but thankfully, I did not have to change schools.

I can’t imagine how challenging it must have been for my parents to move so frequently with their 6 children. But, they never complained. Every time we had to move, my mother simply said, “There are three

things every Methodist pastor must be prepared for at a moment's notice: to preach, to move, and to die." She repeated these words to me when I was ordained.

So, like my father before me, I too have moved from one church to another -- going wherever I was sent by the bishop, taking my ordination vow to itinerancy seriously, like all other United Methodist Elders. The churches I served have been in Elgin, Libertyville, Tinley Park, Rockford, and Arlington Heights, Illinois. And now, here I am in Campbell, California, starting my 2nd year as your senior pastor with excitement and joy. I am confident that God will continue to bless our time together in partnership for ministry, as we seek to be the church the world needs today, doing what God calls us to do.

If we look in the Gospels, we can see that the itinerancy of Methodist pastors and our denominational spirit of movement actually originated from the ministry of Jesus. One of the hallmarks of his brief ministry was that Jesus traveled. Jesus never stayed in one place for any length time. Instead, he was on the road constantly. Today's scripture reading from the Gospel of Luke says, Jesus and his disciples crossed the lake over to the other side. Actually, this wasn't the only time they did so. They crossed the lake of Galilee, going over to the other side to reach different towns and meet different people in the Judean countryside. The Gospel of Mark records this happening several times in chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Jesus' ministry was already successful in the region of Galilee. It did not take long for Jesus' fame to spread around as he healed the sick and cast out demons. Large crowds of people gathered around Jesus, amazed at his teaching. And as they witnessed the miracles he performed and heard the message he proclaimed, they began to praise and follow him wherever he went. I am sure that, in the midst of the adoring crowd, Jesus' disciples began to feel comfortable with the signs of success around them. And it was at this moment of feeling settled, when they were becoming too familiar with success, that Jesus asked them to cross over the lake to the other side.

Following Jesus Christ, being a Christian, is not about having a successful life and being comfortable where we are. Instead, it is leaving the comforts of our familiar places and taking the risk of venturing out into the unknown -- going to the other side. It is about giving up the things we cling onto and depending on God and God's provision. It is letting go of what we currently are, so we can continue to be led by God to become Christ-like. Lao Tzu, a Chinese philosopher, once said, "When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be."

Jesus, the frequent traveler, the one who asked his disciples to cross the lake over to the other side, makes the invitation to us, too. What is the comfort zone you need to get out of, so that you can travel with Jesus? What is the familiar place you need to leave, so you can go to the other side with Jesus? What is the security you need to let go of, so that you can fully trust and rely on God on your new faith journey? What is the false self you need to leave behind, so that you can discover your true self while traveling with Jesus?

Now, let's further reflect on today's scripture reading from the perspective of our church family. What does it mean for us as a church to cross over to the other side of the lake?

Our church is quite a diverse congregation. Take a look around. We have Anglos, Asians, Africans, African-Americans, and Latinos/Hispanics. Many of us were born here in America, but many others were

born outside the States and immigrated here. Some of us are first generation immigrants who came to America many decades ago and have fully embraced the American culture and lifestyle, but there are some of us who are not there yet. Most of us speak English, but for many others, English is a second language. There are many different languages and dialects spoken by our church family. It is truly a beautiful diversity we have in our midst!

However, to be honest, I do not think this gift of diversity has been fully embraced as a strength yet. It's like there is a big, beautiful lake in our midst, and everyone lives around it in his or her own affinity groups or just individually. Every Sunday in worship, we go around and greet one another with the peace of Christ. But, beyond that, how much do we know one another? Especially our brothers and sisters who are not mirror images of who we are? How often do you cross the lake over to the other side to meet people who are different from you?

Friends, our diversity is indeed God's blessing for us. I invite you to recognize and celebrate it. And, I urge you to make an intentional effort to cross over to the other side and form relationships with people who are different from you, who are not part of the circle of your existing friends.

In verse 26 of Chapter 8 in Luke, we are told that the other side of the lake Jesus and his disciples traveled to was the region of the Gerasenes. The other side of the lake was foreign territory, the land of Gentiles. In Jesus' time, a Jewish Rabbi would not have any business with the Gerasenes, who were foreigners. The Rabbi was supposed to minister to only his own people, the Israelites, the Jews. And so Jesus' suggestion to cross the lake must have come as quite a surprise to his disciples. Except for the fact that they were going to a foreign territory, they had no idea what they were going to encounter there when they got on the boat with Jesus. Nothing was certain...

And actually, their trip to the other side of the lake was not a big success. When Jesus and his disciples arrived in the region of the Gerasenes, they were encountered by a demon-possessed man. Jesus healed him, but people did not like what Jesus did to him. In fact, they were so afraid of Jesus that they asked him to leave!

Jesus' first trip to the other side of the lake in Luke resulted in failure. Yet, meeting with this initial failure could not and did not stop him from continuing to venture forward. As we see in all 4 Gospels, time and again, Jesus went over to the other side of the lake of Galilee. Crossing the lake was not easy. Storms rose quickly with little or no warning. In Luke, we read how Jesus and his disciples were confronted by a dangerous storm on their first attempt to cross the lake.

Brothers and Sisters, as we embark on our 2nd year, there is no guarantee that our journey together, especially our actions of crossing over to the other side, will be trouble free. Storms might rise up unexpectedly in unpredicted places, both inside and outside the church. But, have no fear. Jesus is with us! Whenever our hearts shrink before the troubles that may confront us, let us hear the words that Jesus spoke to his first disciples on the troubled lake of Galilee, "Why are you so afraid? Where is your faith?"

So, with faith, let us venture into the unknown future God is inviting us to create together! Let us confidently cross the lake over to the other side knowing that God is with us and goes before us. And if God is for us and with us, who can be against us?

Thanks be to God!