

Doing the Will of God
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“Doing the Will of God” Homily, Pilgrim Church UCC, June 7, 2015 (Mark 3:20-35)

One of my most memorable Thanksgivings was gathering with fellow seminarians for our first Friendsgiving. Friendsgiving is defined as Thanksgiving with friends—the benefits often include, but are not limited to: no travel, no drama, and sleeping in your own bed! That first Friendsgiving happened because it wasn’t feasible to travel to be with my family and some friends were in the same boat. The head of the Student Association organized a campus-wide Thanksgiving dinner open to anyone. Andover Newton provided the turkey and the rest of us were asked to bring one dish to share. All the international students also stayed on campus and had never experienced an American Thanksgiving. We had the best time! There was something so nice about choosing to gather and then sharing our family traditions in the form of casseroles and desserts and you name it. Some of these seminary friends and I continue our Friendsgiving tradition—we still share the predicament of living several states away from our families.

For what it’s worth, I think that Jesus would love the modern concept of Friendsgiving because it brings people together who aren’t even related around a table on an important occasion to eat and drink and share their lives. Reminds me of Jesus speaking about the Great Dinner where everyone is invited. In that parable in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus teaches about someone throwing a fancy dinner party and the special guests all make excuses to not attend. Basically, they all RSVP no. The host then commands his servant, “Go out at once into the street and the lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame . . . compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.”[1] That’s what the realm of God is like—people from all walks of life coming to be together around the table

Jesus had expansive and open views about who we should welcome as his followers, yet his views of family are complicated at times. His mother and brothers show up when he’s beginning his ministry in the Gospel of Mark and stand outside sending for him, calling him to come out. When the crowd conveys the message Jesus says, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” Looks around at everyone sitting there, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”[2] Basically Jesus radically redefines who his family is—these people right here are my family as we are all doing our best to discern and follow God’s will for us.

We don’t need to read this as Jesus completely rejecting his family of origin. Yes, this seems harsh at the outset. But it was important for him to gather his followers and get the message of God’s love out there without his family trying to restrain him or even protect him from the inevitable conflict that was to come. Jesus’ ministry was itinerant in nature. He traveled from town to town mostly among the small villages of Galilee beginning when he was 30 years old. As the oldest son in his family, he should have been at home getting married, having children, and working to economically support everyone. That’s what society and perhaps even his family expected of him. Instead, Jesus goes off traveling around Galilee teaching and preaching and healing and getting into arguments with scribes from Jerusalem!

There’s a modern comparison to be made here and it might be simply fundamental differences between “movers” and “stayers” if you will. Some of the best research on social trends in modern American life comes from the Pew Research Center who I know that I quote all the time. They did a study in 2008 called “American Mobility: Who Moves? Who Stays? Where’s

Home?” And what the Pew researchers found is that more than six in ten American adults have moved to a new community at least once in their lives. But 57% of adults have not lived outside their current home state. Around one in five adults say that the place they consider home in their heart isn't where they're living now. People identify these places as their heart home because it's where they were born or raised, where they lived the longest, where their family is from, or specifically where they went to high school. On the other hand, when the researchers asked why people never left their hometown, “stayers” often say it's because of family ties, the desire to remain where they grew up, the belief that their community is a good place to raise children, or good job and business opportunities.[3]

Some of us at Pilgrim Church have been born and raised in Massachusetts or even in or close to Lexington. Others of us have lived in multiple states or even countries. What fundamentally makes a person a mover or stayer on the human nature level is perhaps harder to assess. People stay in the communities where they grew up primarily to be close to family and the familiar and believing wholeheartedly in the goodness of that particular community. But even if the community would be a fabulous place to raise a family and settle down and it's where their family remains, there are some people who seem to be movers because it's just who they are. Jesus was probably a mover to his core, so the thought of going back home with his family resulted in him not even entertaining the thought. Jesus simply looks around at all these people beside him, including his disciples and says: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Our story gets to the heart of how we define family. Sometimes people will speak of their church community as family. There's a reason for that comparison—from the beginnings of the Jesus movement, people related to each other as brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers. In the beginning, families sometimes disowned a family member who became a Christian so the Church stepped in to take care of folks who needed support. There is a familial aspect to who we are and what we do in the Church, always has been. The idea of family is fascinating these days as there are many people whose family of origin is not all in the same city anymore let alone state or even country. Friends can become like beloved family members and families come in all shapes and sizes, all configurations.

There's this movie called *The Way* and it shares the story of a father and son who are estranged. The father is a classic stayer, a doctor who lives in the suburbs and doesn't feel the need to travel. The son is a mover, a restless soul who decides to walk the Camino de Santiago (the Way of St. James or the Road to Santiago in English.) When arguing with his father as he's dropped off at the airport, the son says, “You don't choose a life, dad. You live one.” The son tragically dies on the Road to Santiago when a storm comes up out of nowhere and the father goes to Spain to collect his son's remains. As he's contemplating returning to America, the father decides that he'll stay and walk the Road to Santiago in honor of his son. Even though he has no experience trekking, he knows that he needs to complete the journey that his son began. Along the way, this American doctor gathers a Dutchman, a Canadian woman, and an Irish writer. Guarded at first, they open up to each other and share more of their lives knowing that life is too big to attempt to walk alone.

When it seems that Jesus turns his back on his family, it's not out of spite or anger or even a wholehearted rejection. As the mover that he was, he just couldn't stay tied down to any one place no matter if that was the home of his heart or not. He couldn't allow his family to protect him and shield him from the Pharisees or the crowds when he had work to do. There's something in this story for all of us to sit with today, whether we are movers or stayers or somewhere in between. Given the great mix we represent here in our congregation, of people who have lived in Massachusetts their entire lives or people who have come from other states or even countries, we can think of our church family as a place for Friendsgiving. We can go out into the streets and lanes and bring in who Luke imagined at God's Great Dinner—the poor,

the crippled, the blind, the lame and compel people to come on in so that the house can be full. For this is what God seeks from us—all people from all walks of life gathering around Christ's Table, knowing that we are welcome here. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Luke 14:21 and 23.

[2] Mark 3:33-35.

[3] D'Vera Cohn and Rich Morin, "American Mobility: Who Moves? Who Stays Put? Where's Home?" Updated December 29, 2008, Pew Research Center.