

Proper 11, Year B

July 22, 2018

A sermon about the disciples need for a get away,
the importance of community,
and a sense of call by Andrew Birling.

It had been a busy time downtown for Jesus and the disciples. It was summer, and in addition to the normal hustle and bustle of downtown workers, there were lots of tourists in the city. The tourists wandered around, seeing the sites, generally not knowing where they were going, and even seeking out the more than occasional healing from Jesus and the disciples. On top of that, one of the main arteries into town had been completely torn apart for reconstruction and wouldn't be finished for several years. The disciples were frustrated. They came to Jesus and began to gripe about all of the things they had encountered.

“People don't know where they are going and keep asking us for directions.”

And

“Just because we follow you doesn't mean we want to be pestered by strangers all the time.”

And finally,

“Your cousin, John the Baptist, had his head cut off last week. I did not sign up for this when I agreed to follow you.”

Jesus had heard enough of their complaints, and decided they all needed a little R&R.

So, they went out west of the city, and found a little place on the western side of a big lake. Some folks from the city heard where they were headed and went on ahead of them. By the time the disciples made it, there was an ice cream shop, several little cafes, and even a Kowalski's market with a Starbucks inside. On a little hill they found a spot for worship, with an historic chapel, rooms for education and fellowship, and a fine modern sanctuary, complete with a beautiful pipe organ. The disciples settled in to rest, relax, and worship, away from the madding crowd.

Except the people still came.

Younger families with children came because they wanted a welcome place for their children to learn about this Jesus guy, where their questions could be asked and answered in an open and respectful way.

Local folks who had fallen on harder times came because they needed food, or shelter, or money, and the community had a reputation for generosity.

Finally, a slightly-older-than-younger musician came because he'd been hurt in a previous position, and he was seeking a place of restoration and healing.

The slightly-older-than-younger musician stayed for several years. His first year was a bit bumpy, as first years almost always are, but his relationship with the choirs and the community grew stronger as the program year wrapped up. However, that summer, the man received troubling news: his mother, just shy of her 69th birthday, died of cancer. He managed to get through her service, move house, and begin a new program year.

He sort of floated through that second year. When reflecting on it later, he found his memory of events from that time was quite fuzzy, and the moments that were the most clear were the times he felt the deepest loss. Fortunately, he was surrounded by three communities in one: First was his terrific team of co-workers who cared deeply for him as they worked beside him. Second were the choirs that the slightly-older-than-younger musician led weekly grew in their own sense of care for each other and for him, even going so far as to raise funds for the headstone for his parents' grave. Finally, the worshipping community itself embraced him fully and wove him into their community as they shared the various baked goods the slightly-older-than-younger musician would bring for concerts and services. The slightly-older-than-younger musician had, in his own humble way, been modeling and living into his faith, and more and more he found community to be at the very heart of it.

And still the people came.

More families with younger children arrived, and energy grew around offering them a musical experience in addition to their faith formation activities on Sundays. The slightly-older-than-younger musician had a fair bit of experience in that area, and when one of his co-workers brought the idea of an organized singing time for children to him, he grabbed it with both his hands and his heart. He had long enjoyed working with children, and one of the moments that filled his soul each week was taking communion with them. He was proud to be in a place where the welcome to the table was extended to even the smallest members, and to watch the joy on their faces as they took part in the meal lifted his spirits each week.

That joy, and that sense of community which said even children mattered, stirred something in the slightly-older-than-younger musician. In addition to the weekly singing time he led with the youngest members of the parish, he also started leading music for an annual summer camp for a week, working with others who shared their deep love of children and commitment to building community. He began to wonder if God was calling him in a new direction. He had been working as a musician in churches for quite some time, and even with an advanced degree in church music, the slightly-older-than-younger musician felt he had more capacity to reach people, especially younger people. The times he'd spent in rehearsals, or planning for them, were some of the highlights of his week each week, and perhaps there could be a way to do that, or something like it, in a more concentrated way. He started to consider that he might be being called to become a classroom teacher.

It was a bit frightening to consider such a change in his life's direction. The slightly-older-than-younger musician had served in churches since he was 13, and even before that he'd sung as a boy soprano in his home parish. He'd spent thousands of dollars training in his craft, as well as thousands

of hours perfecting it. In the end, it was that training that gave him both the courage to make such a change, as well a sense of calm while doing it. In the moments when the idea of leaving a career he had often loved seemed too difficult to take, he'd recall these words of Psalm 121:

My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore. (Psalm 121:2-4, 7-8)

That sense of being always kept by God was so calming to him because he'd always known it. Immersed in the church as he was from the time he was an infant, that sense of being kept by God was always there. It was that sense of being kept that helped him in his coming out, in his ending of a terrible relationship, and in dealing with the tremendous grief of losing both parents within two and a half years. And he knew, from going through all those trials, that it was not a sense of being kept by a far away God, but from a God brought near through Jesus. Indeed, as the letter of Paul to the Ephesians reminds us today, through Christ there is no longer near and far, but one great community, one great

“structure, joined together and grow[ing] into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

And you, and the slightly older-than-younger musician are part of that dwelling place. And through the Spirit in each of us, it becomes not a stationary dwelling place on a lake west of a bustling city, but goes wherever we are and manifests itself through everything we do.

People still come. And people go.

Knowing these things, the now in-his-middle-age musician is ready to step out on a new path, carrying his piece of the dwelling place to far away Oakland. There will be dark and scary days there for him, just as there will be dark and scary days here. But, we can all take comfort in knowing that no matter what happens, we will always be kept by God through the peace of Christ. Amen.