

Epiphany Sermon Series: "Is It All About Location?"

"Leaving"

Salem United Methodist Church

Matthew 4:18-23; Acts 15: 4-14, 19; Psalm 27:1, 4-9

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Rev. Sue Shorb-Sterling

The church's season of Epiphany celebrates those moments in which we discover who Jesus is. Those "aha" moments in our faith journey. During this Epiphany we are exploring the idea of location and what location has to do with this journey. Today we are talking about the importance of leaving as part of changing locations.

We all have left something at some time in our lives. Remember what it was like to leave home your first day of school? Or what it was like to leave home to join the military, to go to college, or to get married? Perhaps you had to leave a neighborhood? Or perhaps you left a job to go to a new place of employment? Or you left a job to retire? With each leaving, we left something behind: family, friends, and possessions? Even though we promised to stay in touch, things were never quite the same. But with each leaving we have gained something, too. We may have gained knowledge, new friends, new opportunities, a new family, a new life. Leaving sometimes is difficult even when necessary. Saying our good-byes can be sad. And sometimes leaving is easy, especially when we are excited about where we are headed.

In our scriptures today we have two different stories about leaving. One in which a few fishermen gave up a generations old business to begin a new career path. In the second story as the church grew, an old way of thinking had to be left behind so the new could be obtained. In each story the "leaving" had to occur for faith to grow. In the first story, Jesus begins his ministry with a resounding call, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." John the Baptist had been prophesying that the Kingdom of Heaven is coming. Now Jesus is saying the Kingdom of Heaven is as near as you and I are here now. So what is the Kingdom of Heaven? Is it a location, a concept? I argue that it is both. The Kingdom of Heaven is a location as well as a concept. No, we cannot go to a particular location to see the Kingdom of Heaven. It is not an amusement park or a historical site. But it is a location in that it occurs when we experience heaven on earth, a holy moment, a moment of healing, hope, and peace. It occurs in a particular space, at home, in an office, in a classroom, in church, in the woods, at the beach, at a holy shrine. It is also a concept in that heaven comes near to us as we worship, study the Bible, pray, connect with other Christians, and serve others. So when Jesus said, "The Kingdom of Heaven has come near," he is saying, "I bring you the Kingdom of Heaven. I bring wholeness. I bring justice. I bring hope. I bring peace. I bring love. I bring joy. I bring you heaven. I am here." Was it because of these words, this concept, this location that two fishermen immediately, without any thought, without consulting with their father and other family members leave the family business and their home to begin a new career? It would have made more sense to us if Jesus would have given a sales pitch like, "Come with me. You'll make more money than you ever did with fishing." For us this would be a great reason for them to leave their family, home, their generations old business. Being a career fisherman was a hard job. Every day they went out into the water with just a sail and oars to motor them. Every day was a risk. These men knew the danger of stormy seas. A storm could come up and capsize the boat. Every day they sought out the fish and hauled them back to shore to sell. But, also, as fishermen they knew the peace that the stillness of the water can bring. They experienced this peace as a slice of heaven on earth. They were willing to leave all this, everything they ever knew, livelihood, family, home, to follow a teacher? Yes, they left for a greater, more powerful love-the Kingdom of Heaven.

The second story about leaving begins with an argument over the practices of faith. As the Apostles go out to spread the Good News of Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah, there is a conflict. The Apostles were Jews who were telling other Jews about the Messiah Jesus, but Peter and Paul had opportunities to share the message of Jesus with non-Jews, Gentiles. So the question becomes do the Gentiles become Jews in order to claim the faith in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Do they have to practice Jewish customs such as the Jewish food laws and circumcision? Some of the Apostles thought it was a must. Yes, they need to follow Jewish practices. Others said, "No. This is God at work. It is not about religious ritual. God is doing something new." It divided the group. For some there was only one way to become a follower of Jesus, follow the law. For others it wasn't about the law it was about what they saw the Holy Spirit doing in their midst. They were tearing Christ apart.

Each side believing it was right. Finally they agreed that they needed to leave behind an old way and step into God's new way of creating the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. The Kingdom of Heaven can change even how we view and practice our faith.

Leaving usually requires giving something up, surrendering something, making a sacrifice. When Jesus said, "Repent," he is calling people to do just this. He is saying, "Leave it. You must leave it. You can't be part of the Kingdom of Heaven; you can't follow me unless you leave behind what keeps you tied down, what keeps you from following me." The scripture doesn't tell us that the fishermen, Peter and Andrew, repented of anything. One biblical scholar surmises that the work of repentance happened prior to Jesus calling them to follow, that they must have encountered Jesus before their call, that because of a previous encounter or encounters with Jesus, they were now ready to leave everything to follow. What these two disciples did was very drastic! And we sit here thinking, I couldn't leave my family, my home, and my job to follow Jesus. Maybe that isn't what Jesus is asking of us. Each call is different. A call may be to share Jesus in our families, in our neighborhoods, at our jobs. It may not necessarily be preaching. It may be in those small faithful steps of caring, listening, praying, speaking out when there is an injustice, righting a wrong, speaking a word of wisdom or truth, sharing from your own resources. But every call is to show Jesus to those we encounter in some way. We are called to step out in faith which means we must leave something behind.

What might this look like? Lisa was an office manager. She supervised thirty people. Lisa went to church her whole life. One Sunday she was asked to join a small group which would hold those in the group accountable for their discipleship. They would help each other be faithful in their worship attendance, their devotional life, and their service to others. In this group, Lisa would share how her employees could be just downright nasty to each other. After one of these times, a member of the group said, "Let's pray for God to guide Lisa in sharing God's love in her office." So we did. The next week Lisa announced that she decided not to be afraid to share her faith at work. She bought a daily calendar that had Bible verses for her desk and placed it on the desk so when her employees came into her office they would see the Bible verse. She didn't say a word to them, but often their eyes would glance down at the Bible verse. Sometimes they would say, "I needed to read that today." After awhile her employees began to come to talk with her about their problems at home, with boyfriends, about the job. Lisa would listen and ask if it was ok if she prayed for them. Sometimes they would boldly pray right there in the office. Within a few short months, the atmosphere in her office began to change. The cut-throat atmosphere was disappearing. It was being left behind as these employees were taking steps to follow God's Rule of Love. Repentance was taking place. The Kingdom of Heaven was near. Bit by bit, step by step the nastiness was being left behind and it was being replaced by concern and caring for one another. One day one of Lisa's employees came up to her and said, "You believe in this Jesus stuff, don't you." And Lisa replied, "Yes, Jesus changed my life." Her employee said, "How can I have my life changed?" Lisa invited her to have lunch together once a week just to read the Bible together and talk about it. By the time Lisa retired, most of her office was attending these weekly Bible study lunches. She didn't preach. The group simply read a passage. Then they talked about it and related it to what was happening in their lives. Each left these lunches leaving something different behind, but taking with them a piece of the Kingdom of Heaven. It all began with Lisa leaving behind her anxiety and fear about sharing her faith. By leaving these behind, she was moved to a new location in her faith journey.

Andrew and Peter left their families to begin a new life with Jesus. The Apostles left an old way of practicing their faith so new people could come to know Jesus. Lisa left her anxiety and fear to share her faith. What do we have to leave to take the next step in our faith journey? What do we as individuals, as a church, have to leave to become more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ? Is it an attitude? Is it our busyness? Is it our anxiety? Our fear? Our shame? Our guilt? Our insecurities? A particular way of doing things? What do we have to leave so that God can lead us to a new location in our faith journey?

Resources: *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.; "[Steps in the Right Direction](#)" by Brett Younger, www.minsitrymatters.com

