

ON THE MOVE

Admittedly, those several verses read this morning from the Gospel account of Mark don't sound like much.

Certainly, there's only a vague alluding there to the truly stirring miracles or impressive healings that Jesus performs. There's no evidence at all there of one of his ingenious out-maneuverings of some opponent or other, no hint of one of his memorable, provocative sayings.

In fact, what we have there, as much as anything else, sounds like a mini-travelogue of sorts. Jesus withdraws from Capernaum "to the sea" (3.7), then he goes "up the mountain" (3.13), and finally "he went home" (3.20). Oh, thank you for that utterly underwhelming information!

Actually, there's more going on here in Mark's mind than simply providing boring little tidbits by which to link together disparate little stories into what sounds like a smooth-flowing, continuous narrative. While, to be sure, that transitioning occurs, there is also the appearance of something else, something which is to be noted elsewhere in the gospels, too--something which pertains to the very character of what it means to be one of Jesus' people.

In the case of those original twelve, whose names are given here in Mark's account, to be Jesus' disciple means, quite literally, following Jesus--which is not easy to do, since the man never stays put for very long!

Jesus' call to these earliest believers is simple but instructive. "Follow me," he says, waving them onto the road. And they leave everything behind them, the accounts say, and they follow him out onto the dusty, hot, hilly, meandering highways and byways of the Ancient Palestinian landscape.

Note that Jesus does not say, "Kick back, put up your feet for a while; listen to me, and take in what I'm talking about." Nor does he say, "Sit down, stay put for a bit; watch me, and be amazed by what I can do." No, no, his call is never so passive as that. Instead, he says, "Come with me! Walk with me! Go along with me!"

They do, leaving the old and the usual behind, and they are surprised and amazed by how much they are changed in the course of their following along. If they had just remained close to home, in their comfort zones, going about their habitual duties, it is doubtful that they would have been nearly as impacted.

As these brief references regarding place indicate, Jesus is always on the move. By implication, as his disciples in the 21st Century, something of the same is reasonably to be expected of us.

In identifying such a thing, we must admit that all these mentions of going and moving and changing are difficult for us to appreciate fully. Looking at our patterns of behavior, we seem to value far more the alternatives of constancy and consistency, of stability and the status quo. After all, we are talking about us--we who back out of the driveway on the home where we have lived for 20 years, to drive to the job that we have held since we graduated from high school or college, in the car which we have owned for a decade, to go to the Church where we have belonged since birth, to sit in the same pew which, with very few exceptions, is the only one we have ever occupied, hoping to sing the same hymns that Christians have been singing since the 17th and 18th Centuries. So much for going, moving, or changing.

I know, these words sound downright hypocritical coming out of the mouth of someone who previously has elected to remain in the one and only parish of the 40 years of his active ministry. Let me be the first, then, to confess that there is admittedly something seductive and comforting about sameness, and correspondingly

something unnerving and stressful about the challenges connected to being on the move.

The point of all this humbling criticism, of course, is not to inspire us now, just for the heck of it, to run out and buy a new home or car, abruptly to divorce our partner of 30 years, or to throw off everybody's Sunday morning next week by intentionally sitting in a different spot. It is to remind us of the meaning to Jesus' example and Jesus' call to us--namely that, wherever we live, whatever we drive, to whomever we are yoked, wherever in the sanctuary we sit, we need continually to be crossing and covering some new territory within ourselves, and with one another. These are the evidence of being alive as a person; these are the marks of growth as a people.

If we are following Jesus, then day after day, person after person, problem after problem, we will discover ourselves not staying the same; we will be deepened and stretched in our Christ-following walk. With Jesus by our sides, we will be guided to some strange, new places--places which will exhilarate and entrance us, and confound and frighten us; all places which, as for those original twelve disciples, will unmistakably change us.

Without our declining to give in to the temptation for settling down and settling for, left to ourselves, we will invariably remain merely the same. Taking our cue from Jesus' example--you know, the man always on the move--that cannot be a good thing. Paying attention to his lead, sameness, it seems clear, is never the objective of the journey. It may be the path of least resistance, but it is not the path of Jesus. Insisting that we remain what we have been amounts to a repressing and a stifling of the more dynamic life of God within us. That life of God within us would be one which is excited into expression by our being, in our own unique ways, anything but static or inert.

It occurs to me that it is very difficult to read the gospels and not hear a little of Willie Nelson subliminally playing in the background. You know, "We're on the road again I can't wait to get back on the road again!" (You're singing it to yourself right now.) If Jesus would have had a theme song, this would have been it. You see, if lounging on the sofa with the remote control in hand is the goal of life, there is no point to Jesus' calling us out onto the road, is there?

It is likely that, in ruminating on these things, we will be confronted by a singularly serious question. If we had lived back then when Jesus was gathering his disciples, how would we have responded to him if he had called us to follow?

The fact is: He has. He does.

If that is true, then where is it in our lives that we have any sense of "leaving home," as it were, and of adventurously journeying with him?

Where can we clearly see, as the direct result of being Jesus' follower, a personal shifting from Point A to Point B, in our thinking, in our feeling, in our behaving--and therefore, like him, being very much on the move?

Or, if the truth be told, have we pretty much been, for most of our days, just like we are now? That's not really following, is it?