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June 19, 2011

“Keeping Up”

II Corinthians 13:11 – 13
Matthew 28:16 – 20

Text: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, . . . and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” . . . from Matthew 28:19 – 20

One of my favorite scenes from the movie *Animal House* is where the fraternity brothers, stunned by the news that the Dean had put them on “double secret probation”, are gathered in the fraternity living room. What are they going to do next? The spiritual leader of the group, John Blutarsky or Bluto, played by the late John Belushi, shouts out “Road Trip!” And about six of the fraternity brothers embark on a road trip.

All of us know what “Road trip!” means. It means leaving where you are and taking an adventure. The destination is not as important as the fact you are on the move. The most memorable part of the trip is not where you go, but what happens on the way. A college age road trip builds relations with those you travel with. You get to know your companions in an all too intimate way. Another type of road trip was experienced by about 25 members of this church last January as we shared with one another things that we never dreamed we would share with others as we rode buses along the paths that Jesus’ walked while in Jordan and Israel/Palestine.

The growth of the Methodist church is another example of a road trip. In 1784 the Methodist church began at the “Christmas Conference” in Baltimore. The Methodist movement had just begun in the United States when in 1766 gatherings of transplanted Wesley followers formed groups in New York and Philadelphia. When it began, it was (obviously) the smallest of all denominations in the United States. And yet, in just about 50 years, on the eve of the Civil War, it was the largest denomination (Catholics included). How did that happen?

Road trip!

After the American Revolution, the Christian denominations that were established churches tended to stay in the few urban areas of the new nation. Some impressive church edifices had been built. The cities were more comfortable than the new frontier.

However, the Methodists (and the Baptists) went “westward ho!” as the nation crossed the Appalachian Mountains into the mid-west. As they went the Methodist established churches everywhere the wagon train stopped. In other words, the Methodists moved, going where the people were going. They reached out with radical hospitality. The church grew accordingly.

Today there are more United Methodist churches than there are U. S. post offices. We are the only denomination that can say we have a church in every county of the United States. And yet, the majority of those church buildings that once began as innovative churches in new communities are now stagnating churches because they are no longer part of the “Road Trip” to which Jesus calls us. The populations have shifted, yet the buildings and the faithful remnant, by and large, has not. Much of the energy of our denomination – and to be fair, all other main-line denominations – has gone to maintaining buildings, not going where the people went and/or welcoming the newcomers who now reside in the communities.

Which is the segue into today’s sermon. As we go about the church year, we follow Jesus on a road trip. And if you don’t keep up, you are left behind.

The question before this church – and many, many other churches is: will we move with Jesus?

“Move with Jesus?” you might ask. Did you ever consider that a majority of the encounters Jesus has with people recorded in the Gospels take place on the road: there is a woman at the well; there is Zacchaeus watching a parade along the streets of Jericho; the blind beggar Bartimaeus is found just outside the city gates of Jericho; the Palm Sunday parade route; the list goes on. Jesus is on the move all throughout His ministry with an immediacy and urgency to His ministry. Matthew’s Gospel tells of many an episode where Jesus speaks, teaches, and then immediately moves on. For another example, in the Gospel of Mark the word “immediately” is used 42 times! Bishop William Willimon writes of this Jesus on the go: “What was deemed important about Jesus was not his family or his youth but rather his embarkation on His ministry, His forward movement, His mission. Breaking like a wave across dusty Galilee, Jesus thunders forth into a captive land, God at highest momentum, God immediately. Anybody who wants to meet Jesus or to understand or be with Jesus must be willing to relocate.”

And just as Jesus leaves the earth at the end of Matthew’s Gospel He is walking with the disciples, giving them His last words. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, . . . and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Go!

Into all the world!

Make Disciples of all nations!

In other words, go where the people are!

Practice radical hospitality – welcome people of all kinds!

When I was a conference treasurer of the New England Conference of the United Methodist Church I had a pretty good handle on the pulse of the approximately 565 churches. What I soon discovered was that churches that turned inward and focused on their own wants and desires, did not welcome newcomers and were churches that were on a very slippery slope to closing their doors. When I addressed district gatherings about

the decline of our churches I often said that churches who had Volunteer in Mission programs, went on Mission Trips, worked with habitat for Humanity, Disciple Bible Study, or other active outward focused programs very seldom had problems with finances or declining membership.

It's almost as if there is a cause and effect relationship: those who refuse to move along with Jesus are left behind. Jesus is on the move: will we keep up? And what does it mean for our church?

There are perhaps a couple of implications. The first being our own struggle with the time of worship services. I have read, and you may be interested, to know that the sacred worship hour of 11:00am (or even 10:00am) was established between the cow milking times in England. The family could milk their cows in the early morning, walk to church, then have time to walk back home after service, have a meal, and milk the cows again in the afternoon before dark. In other words, the late Sunday morning time for worship fit people's schedules – then! Now many churches are experimenting with difference worship service times including evenings and late afternoons on Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

Do the times of **our worship services** fit people's needs? And which people's need are we trying to fit – our own or are we trying to invite new disciples? Most people coming to this church don't have to milk cows before and after church, but there now are other demands, particularly for our youth. So we experiment with our times to try to find out.

But a second implication is perhaps more important and has to do with the phrase “making disciples.” “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . .” These words of Jesus have strong implications for us. And it reminds us of the need of practicing radical hospitality.

A United Methodist bishop is tells the story of two small rural churches, each with an average worship attendance of about 50 people. In the first church had two young visitors. One of the older members brought her granddaughter and her little friend. The friend of the granddaughter was of another race than the majority of the members of the church. But the little visitor must have been impressed. The next Sunday she came back – this time bringing her parents.

After the service, a couple of the members took the grandmother aside and told her that she should encourage her granddaughter's friends to find a church “where they would be more welcomed.”

The other church – about that same time – was surprised one Sunday when a young couple visited – an unusual occurrence in a rural area. The couple was interracial. They were warmly welcomed. Two weeks later, they joined the church, inviting two of their friends to join with them. This church, a year later, for the first time in more than 10 years are attracting new young families and they have increased worship attendance by 50%.

That first church? Two years after that incident, the church closed. Years of inactivity, congregational conflict, and poor evangelism led to the closure. At least that

was the official explanation given. But I simply wonder, did they close because they refused to “keep up” with Jesus. Did they close because they wouldn’t welcome the newcomer?

If you know me, you know I have a problem with the translation of the Great commandment, “go and ‘make’ disciples.” And it is for two reasons. The first is that I know that from the original Greek, that term could also be go and “be ye a disciple.” And that fits better with my second reason. Try as I might, (and Deb can tell you I have tried) I have learned throughout the course of my life, I can’t “make” anybody do anything – at least not in a transformative way. Only God can do “make disciples.”

But that doesn’t let me off the hook – for it is through my faithful efforts of being a disciple, being one who welcomes people as openly and as acceptingly as Jesus did with a radical hospitality that embraced and welcomed so many and diverse people that perhaps others can catch that same spirit and also become a disciple of this Jesus Who leads us forward into a world of new, exciting, and different people.

We are called to go and make (or be) disciples to all the nations. That means we need to refresh our minds with the lessons from the Hebrew Bible on radical hospitality.

- That we need to remember how Jesus transformed the life of a Samaritan woman at a well – a woman who had seven husbands, no less!
- How Paul would go to the house of a Roman Centurion!
- How Jesus would use as an example of radical hospitality one of the most hated enemy of the Jews – a “good” Samaritan!
- How in Luke’s Gospel in Jesus appearance at His home synagogue he told two stories of Elisha and Elijah healing the enemy’s commander, Naaman, and cared for a heathen widow in Sidon, reminding both the people of Israel, and us that not only are the faithful the chosen people of God; but that God has chosen all people!

Can we resolve; or perhaps better still, are we willing to resolve to keep up with this Jesus who calls us to welcome and be disciples to all!?!