

“A Journey of Blessing”

Sunday, June 8, 2008—Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Genesis 12:1-9

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This weekend, I attended my college reunion, where I met up with three dear friends who have known me for over forty years. Sue, Merlin, Margaret and I first met each other when we were all seventeen or eighteen years old, and lived on the second floor of what was then called Rickert House in Woodward Court at the University of Chicago. Over the next four years, we saw each other through quite a few dating disasters, all night study sessions and other crises of the sixties. All three of them are here today to listen to me preach, which I am confident was the last thing they ever thought they'd see me do when they knew me back then. All of which goes to show that God has a real sense of humor when it comes to calling people. You can ask them later to give you all the details.

This reunion has brought back a lot of memories. I remember what it was like to leave home, go to a strange place, begin a whole new life. I remember the night before I left for college, being up most of the night, thinking, wondering, worrying. I remember getting on a plane by myself headed for O'Hare airport, in the days before the long security lines and taking off your shoes and worrying about whether your shampoo would make it on board with you. I remember how my heart was beating, faster than usual. It's the same feeling I still get now, sometimes, when I get into the pulpit to try to talk to you on God's behalf and to God on your behalf.

I wonder if it was like that for Abraham, whose name was Abram in those days. Ten generations have passed since Noah, and it's become clear that God's plan to start over again with one righteous family after wiping out the rest of the world, has not worked. So God approaches someone new. Abram and his wife, Sarai, are well up in years. They are settled in their ways, secure in their home where they have lived their whole lives, and probably were looking forward a few more quiet and comfortable golden years in familiar surroundings.

God has other ideas. God tells them to leave comfort and security behind. “Leave your country, your family, and your father's home for a land that I will show you,” God says. Leave your country, the place where you know the language, where the customs and religious traditions are familiar to you, where you have friends and family. Leave behind the familiar things, your certainties and securities, the place where you know you fit in. When I was about eight, my parents took a long-awaited trip to Paris. Much as they had looked forward to the trip, much as they loved the museums and the art and the sightseeing, they were in a foreign land and they had a hard time making themselves understood. One time, at a particularly urgent moment, they relied on their Berlitz phrase book to ask for directions to the nearest bathroom, only to find themselves directed to a room with a giant bathtub in it and nothing else. Then on Bastille Day, sort of the equivalent of our July 4, they joined the crowds of people who came out to watch the fireworks display. For the first time, they felt they were among friends, not strangers. Every time fireworks exploded in the sky, people would say “ooh” and “ahh”, and my

parents, who spoke no French but who could say “ooh” and “aah” along with everyone else, felt at home.

There is no more human yearning than to be at home, to be among those we know and love, to speak a common language, to be understood. And yet God said to Abram and Sarai, leave behind the familiar, go to the place I will show you, and there you will be blessed. This is what the life of faith is about. It's God extending God's hand to us, beckoning us on a journey, a journey that often leads us away from what feels safe and familiar, and towards an unknown destination that God will show us.

“I'll make you a great nation and I'll bless you,” God promises Abram. “I'll give you land, offspring, and my blessings. And even more, all the families of the earth will be blessed by you.”

This is God's bold new plan. God calls a people not just to be the recipients of God's blessings, but to be the means by which the whole world will be blessed. Through Jesus Christ, we too have inherited God's promises and God's call to Abraham. But, God says, the plan can't work if you're bent on staying put in the same place. To bless the world, you'll have to venture out, take risks, trust God enough to step out beyond what is safe and into the unfamiliar. Trust that God has promised to bless you as you show others how they, too, can be blessed by God. That's what Abraham did, at age 75, he packed up his family and all his possessions and struck out toward the new place God showed him.

Being a blessing to others often means going to unfamiliar places—and that doesn't necessarily mean places that are geographically distant. Being a blessing to others often means we'll find ourselves called to different and unfamiliar ways of acting and interacting, ways that feel strange, ways that make our hearts beat a little faster. That's part of what it means to step out in faith.

In a world where everyone is busy, busy, busy, we can slow down enough to greet other people in a way that says that all people are valuable and important in God's eyes. Most weekends I walk in Minooka Park. I always make a point of greeting everyone I meet there on the walking paths, even though I've never seen them before. Most people will greet me in return, but there are a significant number whose response is a suspicious and vaguely hostile stare. That's the risk we take, when we greet people. Remember the line from one of our hymns: “Will you risk the hostile stare, should your life attract or scare”?

In a world where so many people feel entitled to whatever others do for them, we can pause long enough to say “thank you” or “good job” or “well done.” Because believe me, it makes a difference to know that someone noticed. The other day someone told me something I'd said in a counseling session really made a difference in someone's life. You know, that person really blessed me. I felt great the whole rest of the day. However hard we try to pretend it doesn't really matter, there isn't a single one of us who doesn't yearn to know we're appreciated—and not just for what we do, but for who we are.

In a world of incivility, where public figures think nothing of referring to their critics as scumbags and sleaze balls, we can model ways of respectful disagreement, of showing the world that it's possible to be tough on issues but tender on people. We can show the world that people matter more than things and our relationships matter more than most of the issues we disagree about. There is a story of a rabbi who was asked by one of his parishioners whether it made a difference if he used the automatic lane or the attended lane when paying his toll on the toll way. The rabbi answered, when you have a choice between a human being and a machine, always choose the human being. Because you see, every interaction with another human being is an opportunity to be a source of blessing, and we are here on earth to bless each other.

And then there are the situations where we're called to step out in faith and doing that gets well, complicated. Maybe this week you read about a woman named Carol Race who wanted to attend Catholic Mass with her thirteen year old son at the Church of St. Joseph in Bertha, Minnesota. That sounds simple enough, but it wasn't. Her son Adam is over six feet tall, weighs 225 pounds, and is autistic. The priest said Adam disrupted worship and was a threat to the safety of others. Adam and his mother were told they could sit in the church basement and watch a video feed of Mass by themselves, but Adam wasn't welcome to attend Mass with everyone else at St. Josephs. Mrs. Race says Adam isn't dangerous, though his behavior is sometimes odd and distracting, and that the priest simply doesn't understand autism. And in any case, sitting in the basement watching a video isn't the same as attending Mass. And that's where things broke down. The priest went to court and got a restraining order to keep Adam away.

Now perhaps like me, your first response to this story is outrage. Surely the people of God could have figured out a better solution. Whatever Adam's difficulties, he is a child of God, and he and his mother should be welcomed and supported and cherished in God's church along with all the other children of God. Surely the promises we as a community make to our children in baptism speak to this situation. *Do you promise to nurture Adam, by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging him to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of his church?* Did we say, but he'll have to watch us on video feed from the basement? But when we start to ask, what would it look like for the pastor, for the people to step out in faith and live these promises, to be a blessing in this situation, you begin to realize what is at stake. Would I be able to speak over Adam's grunting and ranting week after week? Would we as a community be willing to take turns sitting with Adam, would we help Mrs. Race help Adam learn to control his behavior, walking outside with him when things got too difficult? Or would it be easier to sit back, sulk and complain about those who disrupt our comfortable, peaceful and tranquil way of life? Or ask a court to resolve our discomfort?

God said, "Leave your country, your family, and your father's home for a land that I will show you." A strange and unfamiliar land where all people are welcomed and honored and treated with mercy and compassion. A land where we let go of our judgments about what makes a person worthy, because there is no hierarchy of achievement and accomplishment in the kingdom of God. A land to which we come only by God's gracious invitation, not because any of us are especially good or deserving. It's the land

to which Jesus invites us all when he says, "Follow me." Follow me and the blessings of the kingdom will be yours, beyond what you can even imagine. Follow me and I will show you how through you, all the families of the earth can be so blessed.

Presbyterian pastor Frederick Buechner says that "Faith is a word that describes the direction our feet start moving when we find that we are loved."

As a child, beginning at age 7 I began leaving home for the summer to spend eight weeks at summer camp. At the end of the summer we'd all take the train home to Grand Central Station in New York City. We'd get off the train and walk into a vast room filled with parents, all looking for their children. I can remember scanning the crowd, looking, heart pounding. And then, in that sea of faces, I'd see my father's tanned face, smiling. My mother beside him, wearing a T-shirt or dress that looked like an elegant painting. I'd catch their eyes, I'd know I was home and loved.

This is the place, brothers and sisters, where we hear that we are home and we are loved. And where we are called to step out in faith, so we can bless the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.