

Are We There Yet?

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I find it so interesting that we are talking about our faith journeys as part of the worship services, and the UCC's Daily Devotions this week have talked about journeys. When I read today's scripture in the Revised Common Lectionary, I kept thinking about journeys and destinations, and I remembered Laurel's message from a year ago about the difference between tourists and travelers. I remember this message for two reasons: (1) it was one of those rare times when Christopher was with me at church, and (2) it really made me wonder: Am I a tourist or a traveler? Tourists, travelers, journeys, and destinations. They have a lot to do with each other, but this morning I am going to focus on journeys and destinations.

When I was a child, my father would load us all up in the family car and off we would go on a ride to who knows where to look at some old car he might be interested in. In my opinion, my father was a gifted mechanic. He could listen to a car and know just where he needed to focus his attention to figure out the issue so he could fix it. He maintained all the family vehicles. I don't ever remember him needing to take our cars to a garage to be fixed; he did it all himself. And so, we would go out trekking through the willywags on the hunt for a vehicle he might be able to use for parts. I found these trips boring and dealt with them in the way I dealt with most everything: I took a book with me, curled up against the car door, and read. When we would get wherever we were going, I would look around for a minute or two and then return to my book. My father loved these rides; for him, it wasn't about the destination so much as the anticipation of what he might find there.

I've thought a lot about journeys in life and faith over the last couple of weeks. We have physical journeys from infancy to adulthood, and emotional journeys that can run the gamut from love to pain, anger, acceptance, and forgiveness. These emotional journeys do not have roadmaps. There is no set time when we move from one emotion to another. I used to think that all journeys had destinations, but I have come to believe that's not so true.

I believe that destinations are places you go. Christopher and I used to plan a summer vacation. We would determine where we wanted to go and what we wanted to do when we got there, how long we would stay, and when we would return. There were always some surprises on our trips. We could only plan so much because this was before the internet. For example, I had no idea when we camped in Vermont on Lake Champlain that Niagara Falls was only a few hours away. We were tourists, and our destinations had end points. We may journey from destination to destination, but we might get stuck at some destinations.

First Samuel talks about two life and faith journeys. Eli was a servant of God whose life and

faith journey was nearing its end. Samuel was a young boy whose life and faith journeys were just beginning. The two were in totally different places, yet on the same path. According to the Bible Project, the writer of the Gospel of Mark takes the reader on the journey of Jesus's life and describes how people reacted to Jesus throughout his ministry. There were followers, many of whom were confused about what to make of him, and those who rejected him. According to Mark, Jesus is the physical embodiment of God, but no one really gets it. Mark doesn't resolve this for the reader but leaves the reader to figure out on their own which way they will think about Jesus. Will you follow, question, or reject Jesus? The third chapter of Mark focuses on the Pharisees rejecting Jesus, and Jesus, in return, rejecting their interpretation of what is right and lawful in the eyes of God. Jesus doesn't let them alter his journey.

Faith journeys can be about all three of these options over a lifetime. When I thought I had my faith all figured out— $A+B=C$ —something would make me question this simplistic way of believing, and at times left me rejecting an aspect of faith that didn't fit neatly into this equation. I think this is where the Pharisees are. They think they've reached their faith destination, with nothing more to do or see or find. They only question Jesus to try to trap him; they don't want to follow him or figure him out. They don't want anyone to mess with where they are in life; they have power and authority, and they're where they want to be, so they reject anything that differs from where they stand.

While I would say life overall is a journey, we can all get stuck at destinations along the way, in both life and faith. We get somewhere that feels perfect, and we want to stay there forever, but life and faith don't work that way. If we stay stuck, we are letting the destination stop our journey towards whatever next thing might or might not feel just as perfect. I have let fear, comfort, and doubt stop my journey at different times. When I was a teenager, I was very active in my church, but I rarely talked about it and would have felt embarrassed to do so. It wasn't something my peers talked about, and I wanted to fit in. I also saw adults in my church behaving badly, and I became disillusioned and spent several years away from church because of that. I was stuck on my faith journey and didn't know how to get beyond those emotions. After I had Christopher, I returned to church so he would attend Sunday School. (This was history repeating itself. My parents did the same thing, except they attended only on the high holidays.) I joined the choir and attended regularly, but I wouldn't say I was involved. I was still a little stuck.

What really got me unstuck was when, as a new member here at Centre Street, I was asked to be on the committee working on the Open and Affirming process. I realized that what I had been taught about faith in my previous conservative, more fundamental church now felt restrictive and exclusionary. I realized that although one of my Sunday School songs, "Jesus Loves the Little Children," says Jesus loves all the children of the world, my church didn't really believe that. Instead, they believed that Jesus loves only Christian children—not Muslim children, not Buddhist children, and certainly not children of those poor lost souls who didn't go to church and called themselves atheists. Working through the Open and Affirming process broke me open in a way I had never been before. To me, it felt like a perfect moment when at our Annual Meeting

we voted unanimously to become an Open and Affirming congregation. Instead of feeling stuck, I felt momentum, which led me to serving as one of the lay speakers who gives a message during worship services several times a year.

I don't have everything figured out. In fact, sometimes I wonder if I have anything figured out at all, but that's okay. Like the New Testament followers of Jesus, I might be confused sometimes, but the journey is the thing that keeps me wondering what is next.