

“Home & Away: Tension in our Spiritual Travels”

Exodus 16:1-3, Luke 10:1-6

This morning, I would like to share with you my reflections about the spiritual tension that we all experience when our travels take us away from home. Not just our physical residence, but the emotional and spiritual space that gives us comfort or the feeling of safe harbor. For those of you who know even a little bit about my living arrangements for the past 7 months, and, my love of world travel, I am well qualified to reflect upon both the joys and the challenges of being “on the road.” But before we get into any of that, I need to think out loud with you about what it means spiritually, to be *home* or *away*.

Can we talk sports for a few minutes? I spent some time this week reading¹ about the advantage that home teams have in almost every sport. Statistically, at all levels and in all types of sport, the home team has a modest advantage.

Some of the reasons for this are fairly obvious: the home team is familiar with the playing surface or field and its idiosyncrasies (think caroms off the green monster); the visiting team may have traveled some distance to get to the game and may be tired from a long bus or plane ride; at home games, the stands are filled with supporters, including cheerleaders, banners, and sympathetic announcers (this emotional benefit alone is often considered as valuable as having an extra player on the field). Anyone who has participated in sports at any level will understand, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, that the experience of playing a game at your home field is quite different than playing away. So widely accepted is this idea that it is a metaphor you will hear used in many other disciplines: business, sales, politics, etc..

Has anyone ever heard of an organization called Outward Bound?² They are an outdoor education program for people of all ages, but primarily used with youth to teach core life-values. The premise of outward bound is that people learn experientially -- by doing. They also believe that most people are not

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Home-field_advantage

² <http://www.outwardboundwilderness.org/>

sufficiently challenged emotionally or physically, and that they need to be removed from their comfort zone and placed into an outdoor environment (wilderness or ocean) where circumstances require them to learn to develop skills of compassion, service, and personal and social responsibility.

Personally, I have had two faith-based “Outward Bound” experiences that have deeply shaped my life in positive ways. I have come to recognize the merit of this concept that all of us are highly resistant to leaving our comfort zones—all of us have familiar and soothing patterns—predictable routines and structures--that calm us and give us a sense of security in an ever-changing world.

We all need structure in our lives—and I would argue that it is these routines and structures that create for us what we call “home.” The places where we feel at home are those places where we feel safe, comfortable, and we know what to expect. Ultimately, we prefer that the aisles stay the same at our market, that our TV channels don’t get renumbered, and that we are able to sit in the same pew each Sunday. We tend to visit known places and return to favorite restaurants. The fact is, most of us don’t appreciate any extra excitement in our lives, thank you very much. We prefer playing on our home field as much as possible because truthfully, it can be challenging to be in the emotional space of the visitor.

Author and educator William Bridges, has written many books³ and articles about what happens to us when we leave our home—when we leave the comfort zone of the predictable. Whenever we are faced with external changes, we go through an internal and emotional process of transition. The most difficult part of this transition is that for a long time, there is nothing to replace what has been lost. Change creates loss, which pushes us into a wilderness place full of chaos and anxiety. Change pushes us out of our comfort zone, our “home”, and forces us to live in the emotional space of the visitor—a place of uncertainty. That which was comfortable and familiar is gone, yet, we don’t have anything new to replace it with...we don’t know what our lives are going to feel like when we get through adjusting to the change.

In Exodus, we are told a story that illustrates the spiritual pressure of what it feels like to be away from our “home” for a long period of time. You all know this story. The Israelites are in captivity in

³ *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, DeCapo Press, 2004

Egypt making bricks and working in the fields of Pharaoh. They have been slaves for generation after generation—Egypt and slavery is the only home they know. As slaves, they don't have to fend for themselves or make their own decisions—their master makes all their decisions for them: “come here, do this, do that.”

Along comes their liberator, Moses, who calls out to Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” Pharaoh says, “no way, I need these slaves.” Following a series of ten plagues brought upon Egypt by Moses, Pharaoh cowed into seeing that these slaves are too much trouble and that he should really let them free. There is an exciting chariot chase to the Red Sea, where most of Pharaoh's army is drowned, and the people of Israel head off into the sunset of the Promised Land, happy ending right? Wrong. What happens? They spend 40 years lost, wandering around the desert. What's that about?

Turns out the Israelites didn't know how to make decisions on their own—they didn't know anything about self-governance or self-determination. They only knew how to be slaves, so they had to go through the slow and painful process of forming a new identity as a people. It was a process that took them 40 years—a *whole generation* had to die off before they were ready to enter the Promised Land with a new identity.

What is important for my sermon this morning is to remember the emotional state of the people of Israel when they get out into the wilderness. On the surface, one would imagine that they would be dancing and singing and praising God that they are free. Is that what happens? No. Right away they start grumbling and complaining. “We're lost and we're hungry and we don't like this place.” In fact, the people cry out to go back to Egypt...“at least in Egypt we knew we were going to get fed.”

You see, the anxiety that people experience of being away from the familiar prevents many from ever experiencing something new. The desire to “go back to Egypt” can be so strong that it keeps many people in bondage to old patterns that are comfortable and easy, but not liberating. Many people never muster the courage to leave Egypt because the emotional stress of being the visiting team, even for a short

time, is more than they feel they can bear. Sometimes the devil you know seems better than the devil you don't know...

For anyone who has traveled anywhere (but especially the developing world), you know this tension between home and away. On one hand, you try to push yourself and take risks to try things that you have never experienced before: new foods or engaging a stranger in conversation or learning a few new words in the local language. Many days, if everything is going smoothly, it is not difficult to make this effort. Some days, however, the strain of "being away" wears you down and makes you weary. I don't know about you, but from time to time you need to take a mental health day and just stay in your room, eat familiar foods, and renew yourself so that you can be ready the next day to venture out again.

Please, don't romanticize world travel! It is tremendously challenging physically and spiritually—especially when you are doing so on your own. Every minute you are going somewhere where you have never been before, you are trying to keep in check all your fears about safety and money, constantly staying vigilant about signs and timetables, navigating unfamiliar places—often in a culture or language in which you don't understand, trying to figure out where and what your next meal is going to be, and more importantly, looking for every possible clean western-style bathroom because you've already gotten stuck without one a dozen times in the past week. When our family circumvented the globe in 2008 over a period of three months, much of our travel was like the Israelites living in the wilderness—often not knowing exactly how things were going to turn out, but trusting God that everything was going to work out in the end.

Fortunately, there were some places on that trip where we were laid our heads long enough to establish some routines, develop some relationships and connections that gave us the emotional experience of being at home. *As I have already said, it is my belief that home is more than a physical place—more than a street address—it is emotional and spiritual space that we can create most anyplace.* That, I believe, is one of the kernels of wisdom that travel has given to me.

Kate and I are fortunate because we have had life experiences that gave us the courage to venture into the unknown. Over our lives we have learned some of the skills necessary to be on a long “road trip” to be “away” for long stretches. (That discipline has come in handy to us these past 7 months of living without a permanent “home”) Learning to be *at ease* in that wilderness place enabled us to experience diverse cultures, languages, people, animals, and places. Over the past 40 years we have traveled through 5000 years of human history from the pyramids and temples of Egypt, the wilds of the African Savannah, the jungles of Thailand, the great ancient cities and rivers of Europe, the glaciers and snowfields of the Alps, Alaska, and Glacier National Park, and the volcanoes of Iceland, Hawaii, and the Azores. You don’t see those things without taking the risk of leaving “home.” Those successful experiences, now that they are behind us, help embolden us to consider trips to other places in the world that now, don’t seem quite so unreachable.

So, how is all this relevant to you and this church community?

First, it is relevant because it highlights the emotional experience of venturing out from home space and the natural resistance that we all have to living in that wilderness place. (*Now I’m going to make a few statements that are **metaphorical** not geographical.*) All of you have places that you need to go, but don’t, because it would mean leaving home. All of you have journeys that would benefit you, that would enrich you, that would bring reconciliation or healing if you made them, but you have found excuses not to go to those places. It is scary and chaotic to live away from our home space, yet, as children of God we do not grow unless we take the risk of venturing out of our comfort zone.

Second, because we are not honest with each other about how difficult it is to be “on the road,” we often fail to give one another the support and encouragement that we need to take risks in our spiritual and personal travel. Indeed, we do not challenge one another to step out of our places of ease and we do not often praise those who do. What I’m talking about here is being honest with a friend who is miserable and unhappy in a dead-end job and who needs to take the risk of finding a new career, but no one is telling him/her to step away. I’m remembering right now a woman that I met in Australia who had a

family and friends who gave her the courage and permission to quit her job of 30 years to work as a volunteer for 6 months at an orphanage in Tanzania. Talk about emotional and economic risk-taking...As faith communities we need to do more to support and encourage one another.

Finally, this is relevant to every small country church, because, let's face it, entrepreneurial thinking and risk-taking is not exactly in your DNA. Churches like this are very uncomfortable in "away" mode and you get very anxious when asked to try anything that pulls you away from what feels like home. The default settings in rural New England churches have been set for a long time, and it can take a great deal of energy to coax people into taking a journey towards something different. I understand. *It is normal and natural to be resistant—to want to stay at home. There is a spiritual tension between home and away.* Yet, staying home is not the path to spiritual growth and maturity. Staying home does not ultimately make one more safe and secure. Staying home does not enlighten or enrich. Staying home does not bring the good news of Christ to others. Staying home does not engage others in the work of bringing reconciliation and healing to society.

I am convinced that the path of renewal for all congregations begins with the mindset of world travel. Congregations that are vital and thriving are those who see themselves as mission outposts⁴ and take the risk of leaving their warm and safe homes and traveling to places and doing and seeing things beyond their imagination. So then, what about you? Where will your travels take you this week, this month, this year? How would you like to come and follow me on a world adventure of your own? How might you respond if Jesus showed up at the door today and said, "Come and follow me."? Amen.

⁴ See the writing of Alan J. Roxburgh, especially his small publication, *Missionary Congregation, Leadership & Liminality*, Trinity Press International, 1997.