

Sermon for 8-26-18
Gospel: John 6:56-69
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When you were a child, did you ever run away from home?

I did. I was 9 years old, and very disgruntled about the punishment my parents had assigned for some misbehavior. I can't recall my specific offense or the consequences, just the aggrieved sense of having been treated extremely unjustly and the certainty that other parents who were out there somewhere would appreciate me and treat me far better. So I set out to find them.

I was a shy and fearful child, so this sort of independence was out of character for me. But I had recently finished reading Jean Craighead George's classic, "My Side of the Mountain," about a young boy who decides to leave the big city and live for a year inside a hollowed-out tree somewhere in the Catskills. After reading about his adventures, I was convinced that I too could live off of acorns and wild berries if I had to, and perhaps train a falcon to hunt for me, and build a comfortable home out in the woods. False confidence, when combined with a sense of naive entitlement, can be quite a motivator.

Needless to say, my solo adventure did not last as long as the one in the book. I made it one full block before a neighbor asked where I was headed and promptly shepherded me back home. My mother was working in the yard, and hadn't even realized I was gone.

Lots of kids have a story like mine, about a failed attempt to run away. It's almost a rite of passage. As adults, we look back on these moments and shake our heads and laugh at our youthful innocence and misguided quest for freedom. I had no real reason to run away, having 'hit the jackpot' in the lottery of birth, with two loving and attentive parents who were able to provide for all my basic needs and then some... I had a room of my own, a

bike with handlebar streamers, a stamp collection, and a pet guinea pig -- far more than most kids in the world -- and yet, on that day I was convinced that I could find a better home elsewhere. Never mind that I had everything a child needs to thrive; I sought an easier, more comfortable life than the one I had.

"Do you also wish to go away?"

This is the question Jesus asks his disciples, the ones who are still there after he's explained the level of commitment he asks of his followers. He is not just another in a long line of teachers or prophets; he is the bread from heaven who gives abundant life to those who feast on his fullness. Jesus asks his disciples to consume him, to take his spirit within themselves, to abide in him. And for some would-be disciples, it's just too much -- too weird, too intimate, and certainly not very realistic or practical -- so they run away.

"Do you also wish to go away?"

We are all those runaway disciples from time to time. At different stages in our lives, under different circumstances, we refuse Christ's invitation to abide in him. And we go away... perhaps because we are overwhelmed, or uncertain, or grieving, or guilty, or struggling; perhaps because we're filled with fear or regret, or we've been betrayed, or things are falling apart; perhaps because we've filled our days and nights with so many other priorities that we simply cannot make time for Jesus, and we're pretty sure we can get along just fine without him, thank you very much; or perhaps we run away simply because life, like his teaching in this passage, is *difficult*.

I wonder about those would-be disciples, the ones who ran away when they realized that following Jesus would be more than nonstop miracles and full

bellies. On this day, they could not bring themselves to accept his teachings, to answer his call.

I wonder where they headed after leaving Jesus. Did they find some other spiritual leader, one who told them what they wanted to hear and made it all sound easy, whose teachings fit the way they already lived? Did they tell themselves they could find enough meaning and purpose and abundant life apart from Christ? Who or what did they shape their lives around? Where did they choose to abide, if not in him? And did any of them ever return?

Every person in this sanctuary today has their own story, their own faith journey that has brought them to this point. Some of us were raised in the church, some were not; some are cradle Episcopalians, and some denomination-hoppers; some of us have been spiritual runaways or seasonal agnostics; some have fallen away from the rhythms of regular worship, only to be called back; some of us think we've forgotten how to pray, or never really learned; some are confident in their understanding of scripture, and others are mystified; some have yelled and screamed and shaken our fists at God, and others have never considered it....

Our stories are all different; our paths are unique; and yet, we are all here for the same reason.

"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Jesus Christ calls us here, he pulls us in and draws us close. He knits us together, he unites us in the midst of all that would divide. Christ is the unifying principle, the reason we are here, the source of all we seek.

And even though we don't fully understand him, even though our finite minds cannot grasp his infinite truth, he calls us to him again and again. And though we may be slow to answer, though we may slip and stumble and take detours here and there, we make our way back to him time and again, because we know, deep in our hearts, what Peter knew: Christ has the

words of eternal life. There is nowhere else to go, no one else to claim us and feed us and fill us with life and raise us up.

We can run away as much as we want, we can stray as far as we can imagine, but in the end, nothing else will do. Even if our minds forget, our souls remember this truth -- that one day abiding in Jesus Christ is better than a thousand anywhere else.

The late great poet and novelist Maya Angelou told a story about her own "To whom can we go?" moment. Listen to these words from a woman who knew what it is to abide in Christ:

"In my twenties in San Francisco I became a sophisticate and an acting agnostic. It wasn't that I had stopped believing in God; it's just that God didn't seem to be around the neighborhoods I frequented... One day [my voice] teacher ... asked me to read to him ... from *Lessons in Truth*, a section which ended with these words: 'God loves me.' I read the piece and closed the book, and the teacher said, 'Read it again.' I pointedly opened the book, and I sarcastically read, 'God loves me.' He said, 'Again.' After about the seventh repetition I began to sense that there might be truth in the statement, that there was a possibility that God really did love me. Me, Maya Angelou. I suddenly began to cry at the grandness of it all. I knew that if God loved me, then I could do wonderful things, I could try great things, learn anything, achieve anything. For what could stand against me with God, since one person, any person with God, constitutes the majority?

That knowledge humbles me, melts my bones, closes my ears, and makes my teeth rock loosely in my gums. And it also liberates me. I am a big bird winging over high mountains, down into serene valleys. I am ripples of waves on silver seas. I'm a spring leaf trembling in anticipation."ⁱ

Friends, even though we get confused, even though we mess up and fall away, let us never forget this truth -- the same truth St. Peter knew (and St. Maya) -- there are many places to go and many people to follow, but only one source of living mercy, and redemption, and eternal life. **Amen.**

ⁱ Maya Angelou. *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*. NY: Random House, 1993. 75-76.