



I'm Heading Out. Wanna Come Along?

TEXT
Mark 1:16-20

October 11, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

It was a few weeks ago, we turned to Peter, Andrew, James and John. Jesus invited them to hit the road, and they dropped everything and went along. Of course it's more than just being obedient. If I understand the text, there was a hunger in them that made them ripe for the picking when Jesus said, "I can show you a better life." Who doesn't want a better life, a more meaningful life, an authentic life?

Inspired by them, I invited you to reflect on what you want for yourself and for others. I shared some things I want and invited you to do the same. But we visit with these early disciples once more.

We are talking about road trip because faith is a journey, and it's at least in part to find that better life, that authentic life.

The movie *Dallas Buyers Club* tells the story of Ron Woodruff, who is a reckless man dying of AIDS. In one of the few lines of the movie that is not laced with profanity he says, "This is my life; but I wish it were someone else's."

Who doesn't from time to time wish that their life was different, new, deeper? There's a fear that we might become our own Willie Loman from *Death*

of a Salesman, plagued by mediocrity and self-doubt. I get that. When it comes to self-doubt, I have an eternal internal second-guesser. The search for an authentic life puts us on the road. We don't want to be a cookie cutter self. We want a real life.

When we are young, that can mean a big life. We want to make a difference. We want to change the world. We want to have Instagram followers we have never heard of.

When I was a kid, which was before Instagram just for the record, I dreamed of being a preacher. My dad heard me as a 5-year-old child's voice practicing my craft in the backyard. He said, "Tom, are you pretending to be your father?"

I said, "You, no man, I'm Billy Graham." We dream big, or better said, dream of a big life.

But somewhere along the way, if we are fortunate, we fail to become that rock star or movie star or sports god. If we are fortunate, our stars shine in lesser skies, and we begin to look for a life defined less by its size and more by its meaning.

And that's what puts us on the road.

When I was in seminary, I read a little bit of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, who said

we must battle to keep from being absorbed by the culture, the masses with whom we live. We are at risk of just falling in the ruts that have been worn by the crowds; our life is lost among a non-specific "them." We want to construct a life that is our own, independent, unique. This is what Heidegger says is authentic. We march to the beat of our own drummer.

That drive is real and deep, but it is also risky.

On the road we learn something pretty quick. We learn that it's hard to tell if we are marching to the beat of our own drummer, or if we are just alone.

When Jesus invited his followers to road trip with him, it's no accident that he invited them to do it together. For the authentic life, the real life for which we were created, is a life of love, and love only lives in relationship. That means the Christian road trip is a trip we take together.

We live in a culture so committed to individualism, to marching to our own drummer, that the world is filled with one-man bands and we are lonely. One of the consequences of 2020 is this loneliness that is already so common in American culture is exacerbated by our being pushed away from our normal

connections. And maybe in an odd way, there is a gift in this — a gift that shows us we need each other.

Marina Keegan died in an automobile accident a few days after she graduated from Yale University. Her essay published after her death begins, “We don’t have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I could say that’s what I want in life.” She’s right. I wish we had a word for the opposite of loneliness.

If I understand the text, and if I understand this faith, the central practice of Christianity is to be intentional about relationship, about friendship; to realize that an authentic life, with apologies to Heidegger, is not found in independence, but in relationship. We are defined by who we love and how we love them. What the followers of Jesus discovered right away was that they couldn’t follow Jesus without bumping into all the other people who were following Jesus, which was the point.

One of the realities displayed in neon colors in 2020 is the pursuit to define oneself over against others. It’s political, it’s racial, it’s economic. This is bigger than where we stand on issues: we are watching our culture eroding, our communion dissolving, because it seems that so many Americans can only imagine being free if they have no responsibility to another, no obligation to the common good, no connection. And maybe that’s America, but it’s not gospel.

No wonder there is so much hate in the atmosphere. No wonder we are lonely.

This is our world now. That means that the basic work of loving the neighbor, of being a friend who can be trusted, of living a life devoted to the common good, is all the more necessary today.

Keegan said, “We don’t have a word for the opposite of loneliness.” She describes the opposite of lonely as a feeling, and she is right, but it’s more than feeling. The opposite of lonely is a practice as well. If I had to name a word that is the opposite of lonely, I think it might be Church. When we get it right, we know we are in it together.

Let me make it simple for today. Someone needs you today. I don’t know who. It may be that they need somebody, or it may be that they need you.

We may not be able to change the culture. We may not be able to overcome the voices that tell us all the time that we are on our own, and the only way to be human is to be free from any obligation to our neighbors; that the real life is one unencumbered by commitment to the common good. That ship may have sailed, and we may not be able to change that.

But we can make sure it doesn’t change us. Even in this lonely, divided, hate-filled world, we can practice holy friendship and just wait and see what God might do with that.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.