



Hit the Road

TEXT
Luke 15:11-18

September 13, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Codi and Hallie are young adults and sisters in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Animal Dreams*. It's the 1980s, and Hallie gets an itch for the road and goes off to Nicaragua. It was during the Contra War. Hallie writes a letter to her sister and tries to explain why she is in Nicaragua.

Codi, here's what I've decided: the very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. ... What I want is so simple I almost can't say it: elementary kindness. Enough to eat, enough to go around. The possibility that kids might one day grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed. That's about it. Right now I'm living in that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides. I can't tell you how good it feels.¹

Her travels opened her eyes to truth about the world and truth about herself. It's the kind of thing we learn on the road.

Jesus knew about that. One of the stories that he loved to tell was about a journey:

¹¹"There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger

of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

The prodigal hits the road. There has always been a draw to the road. The open road, the wheel in our hand, no map ... heads Carolina, tails California ... just discover what's waiting. It's an image of freedom; but often what drives this journey is a hunger. We are searching for something. This hunger shows up in our books and movies and songs:

The classics like Odysseus and his journey home after the fall of Troy.

Not much unlike the novel *Cold Mountain*, as Inman tries to find his way home near the end of the Civil War.

There's Huck Finn, all but forced on the road of the mighty Mississippi.

And there's Captain Ahab, possessed and crazed, driven to the road of the sea to destroy evil, as he sees it.

There's Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*, driving until

he can find a place that makes room for him in this world.

There's *Canterbury Tales*, and *Life of Pi*, *Lord of the Rings* and even Dr. Seuss's *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* Everyone is drawn to the journey.

Willie Nelson can't wait to get *On the Road Again*.

For Rascal Flatts, *Life Is A Highway*.

And the Boss sings, *Tramps Like Us Were Born to Run*.

There is a restlessness in us. The old teacher St. Augustine, put it this way: "Our hearts are restless." Augustine believes that's the way God has made us.

With a yearning for something else, something new, there is a sense that there's got to be more than this. Some are chasing their fifteen minutes or some life-changing purpose. For more than will admit it, it's about money, or prestige, or power. And to some degree, we find those things, we capture those things. But it is in finding them that we realize they are not our home, not our destination. They leave us empty, still looking down the road for something.

Because if I understand it, this journey is less about what's out there; it's more

about what's in here (self). Someone said, the reason for the journey is always self-discovery.²

I think that's it. The way we say it today is that we want a life that is real and authentic, and we want to live in a way that matters. That want is what creates the restlessness and puts us on the road. Because we assume if we are here and can't find it, well, then we have to go where a real life can be found. Like the song in *Hamilton*, in New York you can be a new man. We are in search of the new person, the authentic life.

I think that's what the prodigal wants. He is on the road to find it. He didn't know exactly where he would find the life he was needing, but he knew it's not here. So he leaves home; he leaves everything he has known in the rearview mirror.

The prodigal is no hero for most interpreters, and that's justified. When you ask your dad for your inheritance when the old man is still living, it's the equivalent of saying, "I wish you were dead." That might explain part of the prodigal's desire to get out of town, as well as why dad might be willing to go along. It doesn't sound like their relationship was the best.

But there is something else about the boy that's worth noting. It takes some courage to head out. Our guy has some guts, we've gotta give him that. If you have ever looked at your life and realized you are not who you want to be, it takes courage to do something

about that. It is that courage that launches the road trip.

There is a spiritual reality here. The truth is the restlessness in us is because we know we are called to live as Christ lived, and we are not there yet. That gap between the Christ who calls us and who we are now ... that gap is what launches us on the journey. But it takes courage.

This is what I think: I think we spend our whole lives trying to become who we are called to be — life is the journey to become ourselves. Our whole lives are on the spiritual road. There is a *new self* that is waiting.

Think of it this way. When I was 8, I thought this (baseball glove) was my life. I was a terrible athlete, just didn't know it. But there was a lot I didn't know, because I also thought Pop-Tarts were real food and that girls were a creation flaw. Fortunately, we grow out of that.

When I was 18, my life was consumed with music. I no longer ate Pop-Tarts, and I thought girls were God's greatest idea. For a short season, I thought I might hit the road as a musician. But that passed when I met folks like Nathan Bliss and could see what real God-given talent looks like.

I still enjoy watching a baseball game now and again — but it's not important. And on very rare occasions, I still pick up this guitar and stumble through a few licks. But for the most part, it's all behind me now. It's hard to believe that I am the same person who

was that 8-year-old kid and 18-year-old teenager — because both at the same time, I am and I am not. I've grown ... and changed.

Here's the point: I can track that growth when I look in the rearview mirror, but it never stops, at least that's what we hope. There is a new us coming. But it takes courage to live toward that person.

Our prodigal had courage. And that courage led him to a surprising discovery. Listen.

*When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.*¹⁵ *So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.*¹⁶ *He would gladly have filled himself with ^[b] the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.*¹⁷ *But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!'*¹⁸ *I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father,"*

When he came to himself, that's what he has been looking for: self-knowledge, self-discovery. When he came to himself, his first thoughts were of his dad, that old man whom he wished was dead, the man he needed to escape, the man who symbolized his own confinement. He comes to himself, and he calls him Father. And he goes home.

He hits the road because to be himself, he can't stay here.

He must be independent, on his own. He's got to make his own way; he's got to leave his own mark on the world. He needs to get a life. *I need to shake off the chains, the restrictions, the confinement of this place.*

But when he comes to himself, his first word is "Father." Father is a relational word. It is a word of belonging. If I understand the text, the first spiritual lesson of the road is that we can't be who we are called to be alone; we are restless to belong.

He hasn't quite figured it out yet; he's still on the journey, for he says, "I'm willing to be your servant." But even there, he is thinking of himself not alone, independent, but he is defining himself by his relationships.

Sometimes the best place to learn that is on the road, when the road gets lonely or we get cut off from those we love. I think the hardest thing about these days that we are in is the loneliness. Both COVID and the political polarization are pushing us away from one another, making us suspicious of one another, eroding trust in one another. In a way, this experience has taught us what the prodigal learned: To be who we are created to be, we must trust that we belong. We are defined by our relationships.

I was taking a walk in my neighborhood the other night, about dusk. A mom was in her front yard. She had a little boy, 3-years-old maybe. They were playing. He was running and saying, "You can't catch me, you can't catch me."

And she was chasing, like a parent does, "I'm gonna get you, I'm gonna get you." And he ran, and as she got closer, he squealed. If you think he wanted to escape, you have no idea what's going on. The whole point is to be caught, to be scooped up in the arms of love, to know in your marrow that you are claimed, that you belong.

St. Augustine said it this way: "O God you have created us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."³

It's no accident that in our theology, our spiritual journey begins at the baptismal font, where we are lifted up and before the whole world it is proclaimed, "You are a child of God. You belong in this world, and there is a place for you in this world because you are claimed by a holy love that calls you by name."

You may run. You may say, "You can't catch me," but there is no escaping this love. Rest in that.

¹Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams* (1990), p. 299

²Thomas Foster, *How to Read Like a Professor* (2003), p. 3

³Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.1, p. 3

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>.