

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Year C
July 8, 2007
The Reverend Amy Morehous

**“You're on the road but you've got no destination
You're in the mud, in the maze of your imagination”**

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You're in the mud, in the maze of your imagination

Does that sound familiar? If it doesn't, maybe it's just because I don't sound very much like Bono, the lead singer of U2. That's one of the verses from their song “Beautiful Day.” David and I were lucky enough to see them on tour, and I can tell you it was a profoundly moving experience, in the midst of a modern setting. Bono and the members of U2 have commented throughout their 27-year recording history that their lyrics and music are strongly influenced by the Bible, and specifically by the person of Jesus Christ. Bono's support of world poverty issues is influenced by his personal religious convictions. There are even now such things called “U2charists”, which take a traditional Anglican Eucharistic service, and integrate the music of U2 throughout. (They did one at Sewanee a few months ago.)

In the song, they're speaking to those of us wearied or confused by their journey – those down in the mud. Maybe you're in that place, the one where “The traffic is stuck and you're not moving anywhere.
You thought you'd found a friend to take you out of this place
Someone you could lend a hand in return for grace.”

Today in the Gospel we hear a lot about healing, and about the journey. We're all on the road...although we might not be sure of our destination. In today's gospel, Christ is sending his followers on a journey. Journeys make for a great metaphor – not just in songs, but also in books and movies. Journeys make for good drama, and they take us places we might not go on our own. Huckleberry Finn. Lord of the Rings. Gone With the Wind. Cold Mountain. Easy Rider. The Wizard of Oz. Star Wars. Star Trek. Toy Story. Terminator. Monty Python and the Holy Grail. Thelma & Louise. Indiana Jones. Finding Nemo. . . .Once you start listing them, it's hard to stop, isn't it? I'll bet you can think of plenty that I left out.

There's something about the promise of going on a journey, about striking out into the unknown, for whatever reason. Most of the characters in those books or movies are in search of something – sometimes they know what it is – sometimes they think they know, but they're wrong, and sometimes they have no idea whatsoever. If you've ever been on any kind of journey – a real one – you know that you aren't the same person when you return. You've been transformed by the experience. *O Brother, Where Art Thou* is one of my favorite movies about a journey. If you haven't seen it, it's loosely based on Homer's *Odyssey*, and it is steeped in the language and metaphors of the Bible and the Depression-era South. As it opens, three travelers have just escaped from the chain gang. Looking for a quick getaway, they run into a blind man, who greets them with a prophecy:

You seek a great fortune, you three who are now in chains. You will find a fortune, though it will not be the fortune you seek. But first... first you must travel a long and difficult road, a road fraught with peril. Mm-hmm. You shall see thangs, wonderful to tell. ... And, oh, so many startlements. I cannot tell you how long this road shall be, but fear not the 'obstackles' in your path, for fate has vouchsafed your reward. Though the road may wind, yea, your hearts grow weary, still shall ye follow them, even unto your salvation.

Jesus is giving his followers instructions for the journey that they are about to undertake. These are not the disciples - these are the nameless, ordinary people who have come to follow Jesus, those who have come to believe in his message. He's asking them to take the gospel forward into the world, preceding him into towns. As they prepare to set off, he's offering them practical instructions. He's giving them – and us - instructions on the journey we're all in the midst of – the Christian journey – the journey to spiritual maturity and relationship with God. Jesus warns us in advance that it won't always be easy – that we will be lambs among wolves.

In the case of Everett, Delmar and Pete, our travelers from *O Brother*, they find themselves pilgrims in the midst of a hostile land – they are shot at, tempted by sirens, assaulted by a Bible salesman, banished from Woolworths and stumble into a Ku Klux Klan meeting. They finally take action to help a fellow traveler, and, finally, finally become humble enough to admit the error of their ways. Their journey ends not with treasure, but with repentance and recognition of grace, and a fortuitous kind of baptism by floodwaters. For Everett, Delmar and Pete, it is a beautiful day. They will all never be the same – their lives are changed by their journey.

On our spiritual journey, Jesus has a list of practical instructions for us. He warns us to travel light – don't drag our baggage along with us. Be expedient – don't waste time. Don't get too interested in social conventions for social conventions sake. Arrive and greet people with peace – share with them the good news of Christ. Be willing to work and live with others – even those most unlike you. Be a polite guest – don't get too picky about your food or your dining companions. You will be served food you might consider unclean, and you will eat with people you might think are beneath you – but don't worry about that anymore – it isn't important. The time for discrimination and separation is over. Don't flit from place to place – stay long enough to build relationships with those near you. While traveling down the path, remember to care for those who are ill or in need – physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually. Tell others about your experience with Christ, about the joy of your journey. If you aren't received well, don't take others' bitterness with you – shake it from you, and leave it behind when you go.

Jesus' sends the seventy forth with three different objectives – to build relationships, to share the Gospel story, and to help others. So, as followers of Christ, how are we doing? This is a tremendous time here at Ascension – we've begun indeed to invest our time, our energy and our resources into building relationships. Some of it is rebuilding and reconnecting with friends we've missed. Some of it is building entirely new friendships with people we've invited to journey with us. And in those relationships, we're telling our own stories. I'm a story person, myself – I love hearing your stories, because there's such a variety of lives and experiences reflected in them. We're also working on telling The Story – the story of being lost, and finding home. The story of love, and redemption, of forgiveness and grace. The story of Christ. And we are working to meet the needs of others – we support FISH and our other outreach programs. So, as a group, as the people of Ascension, we are trying to listen and follow.

Individually, how are you doing? Are you building relationships with others – are you reaching out? Are you telling The Story? Are you improving life for others? What kind of startlements and 'obstackles' have you encountered? We all have them – they're all a part of our stories, part of who we are. How are you living out your journey today – in this place, in this time? What do you need to help you along the way?

Although warned about the difficulty of their journeys, all of Jesus' followers return rejoicing in the fruitfulness of their labors. They are full of joy. "Lord, in your name, even the demons submit to us!" We don't speak in terms of demons, anymore, do we? But we do still have them – I think today we'd call them different things, like poverty, greed, grief, addiction, desperation.

Jesus greets those returning victorious, and offers them more advice. He wants his followers to not be too full of themselves – their joy should be in their journey, in following the path he set forth, in their assurance of their place in the kingdom - not in their “results”, or some mistaken idea of their personal power or worldly glory. They are not measured by their ‘success’ or their ‘failure’, but by their living out Christ’s teaching. Jesus is not asking for the number of souls you’ve brought to him on a plate – the number of demons you’ve personally driven out. He’s only asking for your faithful journey.

Remember those words from the blind man, echoing the words of Paul for today: the road may wind, yea, your hearts grow weary, still shall ye follow them, even unto your salvation.” We’ll be fine on our journey – Jesus assures us so. Not that it will be easy – but that we will not be denied our destination. And we aren’t leaving alone – we have all of our traveling companions with us.

We will come back home in joy, amazed by our growth and our faith, and hopeful about the changes we have made in others’ lives. We built relationships, we told our stories – we told The Story – the message of peace and hope and joy... the message of Christ, and we healed those in need.

At our journeys’ end, we will return to tell Jesus all about it – we will be bursting with excitement to tell him what we did, and who we met – about the friends we made, and the people we healed along the way. Someday, on that beautiful day, when you return home, what will you tell Jesus about your journey?

Amen.