

Betsey Moe
Sermon 5.17.09
“Leaving Home”

Genesis 12:1-4

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”
4So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Mark 3:31-35

31Then Jesus’ mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. 32A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” 33And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” 34And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! 35Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

This is the Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Pastor Ken often starts his sermons talking about a book. One of the books that came to my mind to use in conjunction with Senior Recognition Sunday – brace yourselves, mothers – is *Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch. It is a book that came out in the late 80’s and is still a bestseller among children’s books. [Show book cover.] The book begins [mother in rocking chair] with a mother rocking her newborn son “back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she rocks him, she sings, “I’ll love you forever, I’ll like you for always. As long as I’m living my baby you’ll be.” Very sweet. [Baby in bed] Then we learn that every so often, she sneaks into his bedroom, picks him up, and sings this song to him while he is asleep. She does it when he is two, when he is nine, and even when he is a teenager.

And here’s the point where the book takes a turn: after the son grew up into a “grown-up man,” he left home and got a house across town. [Car driving on the street] And “sometimes on dark nights the mother got into her car and drove across town.” (You can see a ladder on the roof of her Volvo in this picture.) The next picture shows the mother after she has climbed through her grown son’s bedroom window, holding him and rocking him. Does this strike anyone as odd? Personally, I’m glad that my mother-in-law doesn’t do this in the middle of the night. Now, I know that the book is about a mother’s undying love – a kind of love that is constant through all the son’s life changes, a love that transfers over generations. And I do read the book to my own kids, who enjoy it; but when it comes to teaching a lesson about leaving home and letting go, this mother-son relationship is not what I would call an ideal. There comes a time when children need to leave home, and parents need to let go – even though it is difficult.

What do I mean by “leaving home?” I’m actually not talking about the literal leaving home moment as in the story of the three little pigs when they pack up and say, “We’re outa here, Mama.” I’m talking about the emotional side of leaving home – becoming a confident,

autonomous individual, no longer a child dependent on a parent's approval. Leaving home is a process that begins when we learn to walk and talk, saying important words like, "No!" It continues as we learn to think for ourselves, make small decisions, learn to drive and manage money, decide who will be our closest friends. Leaving home is not finished the moment an 18-year-old steps into a dorm room and plugs the mini fridge into the wall. In fact, in our culture many young adults are still quite dependent on their parents until after they graduate from college or until they marry. But whether young adults choose to go to college or start working, move to a faraway place or stay in the same town as their parents, soon the time comes to spread one's wings, to become autonomous.

Leaving home *well* makes possible a healthy perspective of self and an ability to have healthy relationships. Leaving home *well* makes adults able to live into their gifts and contribute at work and in other realms without being overly concerned about pleasing others. Many people realize in their thirties, forties, even fifties, that their leaving home process is still lingering. Here's a real-life example of what I'm talking about from the book, *Leaving Home* by Herbert Anderson and Kenneth Mitchell:

"I was taught that the only cars worth having were those made by Ford. I knew it would offend my father when I bought another make of car and I was correct. He was offended. I was already in my early thirties before I bought my first non-Ford automobile. The decision not to buy a Ford was the first time I remember making a public choice that challenged my father's influence in my life. It was, I told my father, only a "second car." It remained the second car until some time later. After my father died, I stopped buying Fords altogether."¹

Buying a particular brand of car may seem like a small thing, but in the mind of this man, it was symptomatic of a larger issue: there was still a part of him that had not been able to go out on his own and make his own decisions. Married couples will often realize after butting heads for years that their problems go back to one or both of them never really leaving, in an emotional sense, their homes of origin. Their allegiance is still to their parents, even if it comes only in the form of a little voice in the back of their heads. And older parents, not realizing that their influence is holding their grown child back, will happily remain in the parental role, dropping subtle or not-so-subtle hints aimed at control: "I sure don't think you'd be happy in that kind of job," or "Don't you think your kids would be happier if you moved away from the city?" Leaving home and letting go is a topic that I see as relevant not only to the graduates and their parents here today. It's relevant to anyone with family. We all have to ask ourselves, whether we're 25, 55, or 75, "To what extent have I left home?" or, "in what ways am I still trying to control my grown children or siblings?"

[There was a reality TV show earlier this year called, "Momma's Boys" that showed control and dependence to the extreme. (You don't have to raise your hand if you watched it; I only watched one episode because I knew I had this sermon coming up.) Three men came into a group of 35 or so women, each to find a woman to marry over the course of a couple months. The twist was that they brought their mothers, who had a say in the matter. One man did still live at home, and his mother did all his banking, laundry, cooking, cleaning. It showed them at their home, packing up

Herbert Anderson and Kenneth R. Mitchell, *Leaving Home* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 46.

to come on the show. The mother actually went into his room and laid out on the bed that she had made piles of the clothes that she thought he should pack! I couldn't bear to watch any more; this man's leaving home process was not going to be pretty.]

We get the feeling from today's passage in Mark that Jesus was working on the leaving home task with his family. He was teaching in his hometown, and the crowds were thick. Jesus' mother and brothers were standing around outside the house where he was teaching, and they were calling for him. His family had, just one scene earlier, tried to "restrain him" because people were crowding around Jesus, accusing him of being "out of his mind" (Mark 3: 21). So we know that when Mary and his brothers were calling for him, they were deeply concerned about Jesus' safety and reputation. It was their second attempt to get Jesus to stop what he was doing for the sake of his own protection. But Jesus refused to go out to them. He said, "Who are my mother and my brothers? Here are my mother and brothers," motioning to the people in the crowd around him. "Whoever does the will of God is my mother and sister and brother." I imagine that Mary and his brothers were a bit taken aback; you kind of expect to have an "in" with a family member – a sort of permanent backstage pass. But not so with Jesus.

This passage is not the only one of its kind in the New Testament. Jesus says in Luke's Gospel, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother...cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). And in another place, a man whom Jesus calls says, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father," to which Jesus responds, "Let the dead bury their own dead" (Luke 9:60). Jesus seems to be making some steep demands on people who were simply trying to show respect to their families.

But *why*? What is it exactly about relating with parents that would hinder Jesus or a disciple of Jesus from fulfilling God's call?

In all of these passages, Jesus most wants his disciples to realize that their ultimate authority is not their parents or their siblings or their spouse; their ultimate authority is God alone. As much as Mary may have wanted to interrupt Jesus' teaching, as much as his brothers may have wanted to assert their opinions about what he was doing, there was simply no way that Jesus could carry out his mission while trying to please them. Parents give birth to children and have a huge influence on who those children are, but children are not created to follow parents; they are created to follow God. This greater call is what we affirm at a person's baptism – whether it is a baptism of a child or of an adult. In so many words, parents recognize, "This is not my child; this is God's child." In so many words, the congregation says, "We promise to nurture this person in the practices of faith, but this person does not belong to us; he belongs to God – and God has a plan for him."

Leaving home to define one's ultimate allegiance to God was not a new concept brought by Jesus. The call to leave home was the first "call" recorded in the Old Testament. God said to Abram,

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that *I* will show you. *I* will make of you a great nation, and *I* will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. *I* will bless those who bless you, and the one who

curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3, italics mine.)

In order for Abram to fulfill God’s call to fill the earth and to bless those families, Abram *had* to leave home. He had to leave behind his old way of doing things; he had to enter into a new land, trust God to form his new family, and find a new way of living. He could no longer worship the many gods that his father worshipped; he was now called to pledge his faithfulness to only one God, Yahweh. He would have to leave behind his fear, his anxiety of pleasing those many gods, to trust in the one God who could give him life. Abram struggled from the beginning to leave home fully (and he was 75!). He struggled to place his complete trust in this God that was new to him, a God whom his father did not worship. But little by little, he was able to leave home and participate in God’s blessing of the whole earth.

Leaving home and letting go, in a Christian perspective, does not require that a child never come home again, never speak to her parents again, never ask for her parents’ advice again. Leaving home involves a *change in role* that is recognized by the family at home and the person leaving. So a young woman returns home, but does not expect her mother to do her laundry. Or a young man may ask his father’s advice, but knows that he is free to use it or not. In this way, “parents and children are able to be adults together” -- adults with distinctive identities who are listening for God’s particular call on their lives.² Leaving home or allowing one’s child to leave home is an acknowledgement that the family is never an end in itself; instead, the family is a breeding ground for an adventurous life of discipleship – a life grounded in love and trust and forgiveness, but ultimately a life of freedom to become all that God wants us to be.

I do not want to make light of how difficult it is to let a child go. As our children grow up, we are faced with our own mortality; as they march down the aisle for a diploma, we see time marching on and wish we could stop it. And this is not to mention the grieving that goes on when a member of the household is not there anymore; if it’s the youngest child leaving, the morning routines of the last twenty, twenty-five years no longer exist, there are no basketball games to go to, no teenage music in the house. The loss is real; we just cannot avert the loss by hanging on.

There’s another story in this book that is worth mentioning. A mother named Sylvia remembers a pivotal moment with her college-aged daughter – a simple moment when Sylvia understood her daughter as a distinctive human being separate from herself. She says, “As we grazed through our last lunch together, my daughter said, ‘This is exactly what I want to be doing now.’ Hours later, with tears in my eyes, I hugged this tall young woman in front of her dormitory and said, ‘Go fly.’³

“Go fly” is a long way from “As long as I’m living my baby you’ll be.” It takes courage to say, “Go fly.” It takes a perspective grounded in the God who promises to be with our children wherever they go to say, “Go fly.” Listen to Psalm 139, which was our Call to Worship this morning, from the perspective of those we are letting go: “You know when I leave and when I get back; I’m never out of your sight... If I climb to the sky, you’re there! If I go underground, you’re there! If I flew on morning’s wings to the far western horizon, you’d find me in a minute—

² Anderson and Mitchell, 26.

³ Anderson and Mitchell, 107.

you're already there waiting!" We speak the blessing, "Go fly" because we believe that each of us in our own right belongs ultimately to God.

So let's speak that blessing today; let's keep saying it to each other as brothers and sisters in faith, no matter what our age or stage in life, until all freely use their gifts and the whole world is filled with the glory of God. Amen.