

“Willing to Relocate”
Holy Trinity Sunday A
Matthew 29:16-20

Pastor Bruce K Modahl
Grace Lutheran Church
June 19, 2011

In Jesus' Name.

In the current economic climate much is being written about employment. One issue that regularly pops up is relocation. Those who send out resumes say, “Willing to relocate.” Job postings stipulate, “Must be willing to relocate.”

A willingness to relocate is one of the things we witness in our triune God. God is not the static, unmoved mover some make him out to be. Ours is a God on the move. We see it already in Genesis 1, “The Spirit of God swept over the face of the deep.” God spoke. The Spirit/breath of God carried that Word into the chaos and God called the creation into being.

The most astonishing relocation is the one announced at the beginning and ending of Matthew's gospel. The gospel begins with scandal. Mary was pregnant. Joseph planned to break the engagement. Before he could do so, “an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’” Matthew went on to explain, “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’” God in God in Christ relocated from heavenly splendor. From the security of immortality God came to take on our lot. The eternal Word of God, as John explained it, “became flesh and dwelt among us.” Matthew began and concluded his gospel with this astonishing relocation. He made bookends of it. The very last words in Matthew's gospel come from Jesus' lips, “Remember, I am with you always, I am always Emmanuel, to the end of the age.” And then take into account all the places Jesus located himself in between these bookends. He located himself among those who lived on the margins, unnoticed for the most part: lepers, crippled people, tax collectors, women, foreigners, fishermen, and Pharisees. Of course the Pharisees didn't see themselves on the margins but we've learned to push them to the edges. Yet, Jesus spent much time with them, trying to get them to understand that they were as much in need of a gracious God as everyone else. For the sake of all these people Jesus relocated from the heavenly manse to the grave's cold walls. He

relocated to hell's gated community. As far as a person can be removed from God, Jesus went there in order to be Emmanuel, God with us.

We rightfully take comfort from these words when we find ourselves in difficult situations. However, we have to be careful we don't use these words to justify complacency. He does not mean for us to be static and unmoved, playing it safe. He means for us to follow his lead and be part of the movement of the Triune God. Jesus made this promise as part of the great commission, "Go, make disciples, baptize, teach, and remember, I am always with you." This was not a new pattern for God. We see it throughout Scripture.

- God said to Abram and Sarai, "Go from your country and your kindred to the land I will show you."
- God said to Moses, Go to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of slavery in Egypt. I will be with you."
- God said to Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations. Then Jeremiah said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to him, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord."
- The Lord took Amos from the safe life among his flocks and orchards and said, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel." God was with him as he went and spoke, "Thus says the Lord."

The command is, "Go." The promise that accompanies the command is, "I will be with you." They went – Abram and Sarai, Moses, Jeremiah, Amos, and countless others. All those in the congregation at the end of Matthew's gospel went. They made disciples, baptized, and taught in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

So have Jesus' people always relocated. The story of the Methodist circuit rider on the American frontier is fairly well known. In the years after the American Revolution the Methodists made up a small percentage of people in this new country. As settlers moved west Methodist preachers followed on horseback, riding a circuit from settlement to settlement,

building churches as they went. In 50 years, just before the Civil War, the Methodist church was the largest Protestant denomination in the country.¹

The Lutheran story in this country is much the same. Only these settlers did not speak English. Is it a surprise to learn that it was not considered a plum assignment for a new seminary graduate to be sent to America? “No, you are not going to have a nice parsonage and a secure salary. We’ll give you enough money for a wagon and a horse. You are going to search out settlements in the vast expanses of the Great Plains and do the best you can. God bless you and good luck.” They went and Jesus indeed was with them.

The question Jesus’ command and promise raise for me is: Will God not be with us if we are not willing to relocate? I have no doubt God will get to the places and people God intends to go. The issue is: Will God get with someone else? Will God get there without us?

The more difficult relocation is not moving from one geographical spot to another but when the landscape around us changes. Here is an example from Grace’s own history. Grace was founded in 1902. The mission was clear. Grace was to minister to the waves of immigrants coming from Germany. The immigrants to this area settled first in Forest Park (then known as Harlem). Little by little they moved into Oak Park. The German Lutheran Church was St. John in Forest Park. In 1890 it was a long way from north Oak Park to St. John. So a branch of the school was formed in 1896 and a new congregation organized in 1902. The first church building is still there at Augusta and Belleforte in Oak Park. From the minutes of the congregational meeting in 1902 we learn they wanted a pastor who could speak English, because, “There is many a soul to be won from among the Americans.” They called a pastor who could speak English. In fact their first three pastors could speak English but they didn’t let them speak English, not for worship, or Sunday School, or catechism class. The church grew until the 1920s. Then the landscape around the church changed. The sons and daughters of German immigrants were marrying non-Germans. German was no longer the primary language for the next generation. Grace began to decline in membership. The founding mission of the congregation was no longer relevant. Pastor Otto Geiseman arrived on the scene and said, “Our mission is to the world; our means is the Gospel.” He began leading worship in English, and Sunday School and catechism classes. And the church once again grew. Think of how traumatic that relocation

¹ William H. Willimon, “God on the Go,” *Pulpit Resource* (Vol. 39, No. 2, April, May, June 2011), p. 55.

was for many. It meant the loss of tradition, heritage, and their identity. Yet, for the sake of the gospel they made the change.

How has the landscape around us shifted? If we were to put a pin in a map at the place where Grace is located and stretch out a string representing five miles and draw a circle around our congregation we would be alarmed to locate within that five mile radius the Lutheran churches and schools that have closed or are about to close. The landscape around these churches changed. Their founding mission was no longer relevant to what God was doing in the community. They became irrelevant. One big exception is Bethel New Life in the Austin neighborhood.

Why are we thriving when others are not? We are in a stable community for one. Secondly the research shows that long-term pastorates are the most successful. The researchers consider seven years to be long term. Pastor Geiseman was senior pastor for 40 years and Pastor Lueking for 44. They offered stable, steady and missional leadership. Consider also the principals who served Grace: Waldschmidt, Koenig, Kress and now Grigg. These leaders honored the tradition but they recognized the difference between honoring a tradition and serving it. They understood that the mission field is whatever God is doing in the community around us. I seek to follow in their footsteps by pressing the missional questions: What is God doing in our community? What is God doing in our congregation? What is God calling us to do?

I read an article in “The Lutheran” magazine that said the average age of Lutherans will soon be 65. In our Vision for Ministry gatherings the number was pegged at 58. Our average age is 38. The average in the communities around us is 36. Since 2009 we have had 20 member funerals and baptized 44 children. God is calling us to pay attention to children, youth and family ministry. I have said more than once we don’t understand what God is doing in this congregation until we go on a Sunday morning to the third floor for a Sunday School opening service. We have to wait until September now for that experience. But come at suppertime this week for Vacation Bible School and you’ll see what I’m talking about. Seventy per cent of the children in the early childhood program at Grace School come from families that belong to Grace. A goodly portion of that belonging happens because of the school.

Those of us who come from northern European ancestry are fast becoming the minority in this country. Increasingly as I look out on the congregation and even more so upon our school I see faces that reflect other heritages: African, Asian, and Latino. That also reflects what God is

doing in the communities that surround us and what God is doing in our church community. God calls us to honor their heritage as well.

What is God doing in our community? What is God doing in our congregation? What is God calling us to do? Jesus calls us to go, make disciples, baptize, teach and “remember, he says, “I am always Emmanuel, always with you.”