

## *Testify to Love - Your Story Matters*

### *“Our Story”*

[Acts 1:6-8](#)

This message is the second of a three-week sermon series called, “Testify to Love - Your Story Matters.” Last Sunday, I shared with you “My Story,” the story of God’s grace and mercy in my life and ministry. Today, I am going to tell you “Our Story.”

My mother, a Methodist pastor’s wife of over 40 years, gave me these words at my ordination: There are three things that every Methodist pastor must be always ready to do -- to preach, to move, and to die. Like all mothers, she was right, especially regarding the readiness to move.

All United Methodist pastors are subjected to itinerancy. This is because Methodist pastors are sent to local churches by the bishop. The assigned move can be to anywhere and at anytime, though usually personal circumstances and preferences of the individual pastor are taken into consideration. And regardless of the conference, new pastor appointments generally begin on July 1st.

However, as with other parts of our lives, things do not always go according to plan in our appointment system. For example, I had expressed a desire to serve as an associate pastor for my first appointment. But there I was on July 1st of 1993 standing before my first congregation alone as a solo pastor. Another time, I moved in January instead of June to begin an appointment in February.

My daughter was a freshmen in high school at the time. As you can imagine, moving during the middle of her first year in high school to a new town where she knew no one was not easy for her. And as those of you who have had the joy of raising teenage children know, they have a special way of making you aware of their unhappiness. Thank goodness the guilt trips ended one day. She even surprised me by saying, “*Mom, I think it was a good move!*” I think that happened her senior year some time...

So, though it was a long-distance move, I have felt like my move to you has been easier than my previous appointments. Perhaps this is because it was one I had hoped for. I am deeply grateful to Bishop Sally Dyck of my home conference and Bishop Minerva Carcano of the Cal-Nevada Annual Conference who honored my wish to live close to my grandson.

According to today’s scripture from the book of Acts, moving is not just a requirement of Methodist clergy. In fact, embracing a lifestyle of movement is required of all Christian believers. Let’s hear the verses again.

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples at various places and times. When they were together for the last time, they asked him, “*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*”

Jesus replied, “*It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*”

Did you notice what happens to God's people when the Spirit of God falls upon them? They become witnesses of Jesus! And as his witnesses, do they remain in one place? No, they move! They move from one place to another, trying to find new people to share their testimony with, covering every corner of the earth! A life without boundaries or walls.

You see, moving is a way of life for us Christian believers. We are expected to move wherever the Spirit leads us to, following in the footsteps of Jesus and our ancestors of faith.

- Abraham, when he was still called Abram, lived in a place called Haran. God appeared to him and told him to leave his hometown. He obeyed God's call, even though he did not know where he was going.
- Moses settled down in the land of Midian after he fled Egypt. Then, God appeared to him in a burning bush and told him to go back to Egypt. He, too, obeyed, even though he knew the move could cost him his life.
- Jesus was constantly moving from town to town in his ministry, bringing teaching and healing to people across his nation.
- The Apostle Paul was led by the Spirit across the far reaches of the Roman Empire, traveling to foreign lands and bringing the gospel of Jesus to the Gentiles.

And, we cannot talk about moving and the traveling nature of Christian believers without mentioning John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Throughout his circuit riding ministry, he rode over 250,000 miles on horseback, preaching over 40,000 sermons. The distance he covered is enough to circle the earth 10 times!

Following his example, all Methodist preachers traveled extensively, visiting existing churches and starting new churches in new communities in their circuits. Since Methodist preachers moved across the frontier to wherever there were people, there was a time when Methodist churches outnumbered post offices in America! When we, the Methodists, were on the move as Jesus' witnesses, when the Methodist church still existed as a movement rather than an established institution, we exploded in number, spreading like wildfire!

And, this was what had happened in the early church, too. In the beginning, Jesus' disciples stayed together in Jerusalem as instructed by Jesus. But, when the Holy Spirit came down upon them on the day of Pentecost, they began to witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, moving from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, and Africa, to Asia, to Europe, to America, to Australia, indeed covering the ends of the earth.

When Reverend Underwood and Reverend Appenzeller, missionaries from America, arrived in Korea on Easter in 1885, they were met by people who seemed like they would never be willing to open their hearts to receive the gospel. They must have thought that they had reached one of the ends of the earth. But, over 130 years later, Korea is now sending out the second largest number of missionaries, second only to the United States. Korean missionaries are scattered all over the world, testifying to God's love, still trying to find new ends of the earth!

As we reflect upon the stories of our rich history, there is a question that confronts us today: Are we still moving as the Church? Are we following the movement of the Spirit and still witnessing to people with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

A Methodist scholar discovered something interesting while studying the history of the Methodist church. The scholar found that Methodist churches generally stopped growing around the time when they began to have their own pastors, who lived in church parsonages, instead of sharing them with other churches. In other words, we the Methodist church stopped growing altogether when we stopped moving, when we stopped following the growth areas of people, when we stopped being interested in people outside the church and just managed the people who were already inside the church!

If we want to experience new life, if we want to grow again, if we want to be the Church God calls us to be, we must begin to move again. It is clearly written in today's text. Jesus said to his disciples, "*...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*"

When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we will testify to God's love in Jesus Christ, in Campbell, all San Jose, in Sunnyvale, in Santa Clara, in Cupertino, in Saratoga, in Mountain View, in Milpitas, in Los Gatos, and in whatever city and village you name. And our movements won't stop there. We will keep moving farther and farther out, until we reach the ends of the earth!

But, before getting ahead of ourselves, I think we need to go deeper into what Jesus is saying to his disciples. Let's hear it again: "[Y]ou will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Did you catch that? Before going to the ends of the earth, the disciples are instructed to go to Samaria!

In Jesus' time, Samaria was not just another city. It was a city with a bad reputation. Jews despised Samaritans because they were children of mixed blood, interracial marriages. For a society that prized ritualistic purity above all else, good, honorable people would not dare of taking even a step into Samaria because it was considered to be a dirty, unclean land.

Yet, during his ministry, Jesus willingly traveled into Samaria, met a woman at the well who was Samaritan, and ended up ministering to her whole village. And in one of his most memorable parables, he portrayed the Samaritan as a person of great compassion and generosity.

Where are those places our modern society has deemed unclean, unworthy of our time and attention? Who are today's disparaged people that Jesus wants us to reach out to? Jesus was very clear, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea **and Samaria.**"

Going into unfamiliar places, or reaching out to people who are different from us, particularly those who are portrayed in a negative light creates fear in us. So, I pray for the Holy Spirit to fall upon us, to empower us so that we may overcome our fears. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can move beyond the walls of our church, going wherever God calls us to go, boldly testifying to God's love to the ends of the earth. Amen!