

“Quest – Returning Home”

August 29, 2021

Quest: Travel as a Spiritual Act series

We’ve talked about leaving home, encountering new people and places, reflecting on those experiences, and today we focus on returning home. Maybe you think of a favorite souvenir you’ve brought back from a special place - or pictures you’ve taken and treasure as special memories. I’ll confess that the first thing that comes to mind about returning home is unpacking. I don’t like unpacking - especially sorting out the laundry, doing laundry, and putting everything away. If it’s been a vacation, it can be a bit of a let-down to come home and get back into the normal routine and daily rhythm.

And I wonder if we’re too quick to jump right back into that normal routine without taking time to consider what we learned and how it might change how we live. We might have to get back to work or other responsibilities, but how can we allow ourselves the time and attention to really be travelers who are transformed by our experiences - not just tourists who come and go? New experiences can shake us up enough that we need time to be put back together. How can we allow God to take our experiences and draw us into closer relationship with God and each other?

If we’re honest, we don’t ever come home exactly the same. Our spirits have been stretched. Our souls have been widened. Our understanding of the world has expanded. And it doesn’t matter how far away we’ve traveled. Perhaps we met new people - strangers who became friends - heard new perspectives and feel the nudge of the Holy Spirit to live differently in response to God’s call to love one another.

When we started this series at the end of July, I shared that the word “quest” has its origins in *asking* or *seeking* - a reminder of the spirit of humility that’s so important as we journey with God. Part of that is realizing that we’re not the same when we come home. We have new memories, including new friends, new perspectives, and maybe even new convictions to be more active, to be more loving where we live. Jesus calls us to love one another, and we can embrace that call each day.

Since we started this series, I’ve been thinking about travel guide Rick Steves’ advice that we begin with humility whenever and wherever we travel. Here’s more about that in a clip focused on “Celebrating the Family.”

SHOW MEDIA

Whether we’ve traveled outside of the U.S., to another region of the country, or even to a community that’s not familiar to us, Steves’ point about recognizing our tendency to be ethnocentric (when we look at the world through our own culture - and sometimes

see our ethnicity or nationality as superior to others) and acknowledging our egocentrism (where I am the center of all things) is vital to the transformation God wants to work in us.

Jesus' words in the Gospel of John challenge us to remember the importance of relationship - in the Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer) - and our relationship to God and each other matters, too. We are connected to one another because we belong to God. Steve's reflection is really about finding our common humanity and seeing one another as equally precious children of God. It's true that "the most beautiful souvenir" we bring home "is a broader perspective." Maybe we find a healthy dose of understanding others is a great antidote to fear of the other - xenophobia - which Scripture calls us to guard against. We're called to see one another as beloved by God.

Sometimes that broader perspective is reminder of how we're called to treat others. I've learned a lot about hospitality from people in other countries. Our time in Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro has changed how I think about how I offer hospitality - to be a gracious host and truly welcome people.

We've been welcomed into homes with meals that go on for hours because spending time together is important. I can still picture the best meal I've ever eaten - fresh fish and sitting by the seaside. It was more than the meal, too - the hospitality and the atmosphere.

It was a different rhythm than what I'm used to - not rushed at all, but a savoring of time and food and conversation. It's made me think more deeply about how I offer hospitality in our home and we offer hospitality even in the church - making space for others to feel comfortable and know they are important to us.

A broader perspective drives us to consider who we are in the wider world. It's not just about me; it's about all of us. Maybe you've had a moment of conviction. That became real for me when I went on my first mission trip in high school. My youth group went to Detroit. We served at a church as they fed people during the day, and many of us were caught off guard when we were invited to get a plate and eat with the guests. I think we assumed we'd serve and then go out to eat somewhere.

To serve and then to sit and be in relationship with others was important. It was a defining moment in how I understand serving others - not simply as a transaction, but as an opportunity to build empathy and compassion. Returning home after a mission trip isn't just about a job being done, but also a change of perspective and perhaps even some discomfort with the way things are.

That discomfort can be the catalyst for following God's call to love one another better. We can be convicted by the Holy Spirit to do something where we are - to do the

loving thing that we can do in our own community. The psalm we heard today is a celebration of God's hospitality, and as those who are made in God's image, we're called to provide for one another - not just basic needs, but also reflecting God's love.

Jesus says "abide in me" and follows that up with the commandment to love one another. Jesus' words remind us of his role in our lives. We can't love one another unless we abide in him. He tells us to "remain" or "abide" in his love. Jesus tells us to "stay close" to him. Don't leave me or get distracted, but stay connected. Be in relationship in me, and then you'll be in right relationship with others. That's how we experience God's power working in us.

Jesus explains that if we abide in him, then we bear fruit. If we stay close, we have life and energy. "I AM the vine; you (all of you) are the branches." We hear the relationship - one vine and many branches who are close to each other. One vine and many branches who are connected and affected by one another. We are to love one another because what affects one of us affects us all. The fruit that "lasts" is the fruit that is shared and multiplied in community.

Branches don't make fruit; branches bear fruit because they're connected to the vine. We don't do this alone. If you've ever looked at any vine structure - grapes, watermelons, or tomatoes - you can't tell the separate branches apart, but they're growing because they're connected to the vine. And when we stay close to the vine, when we bear fruit, God is glorified - there's no sense of individual achievement, but what God can do in us and through us together.

It's easy to give up when we think we're doing it all alone, but Jesus' image of the vine and branches offered as a part of his last words to his followers challenges us to consider what it means to be connected to him as Savior and Lord - and to each other. Together we are an example of God's power at work in the world! That's not license to think that we're better than anyone else, but it is reason for us to share God's love with others. It's a reminder of the power of God to transform our hearts and lives - to ultimately change us.

A question for us today is **SHOW SLIDE:** *As you consider travel (near or far) as a spiritual act, how is God calling you to an attitude shift about your community and the whole world?* Maybe it's strangers becoming friends, or being more aware of the wider world, or the ways we're convicted to be more connected to others in our community. This week, I received a note about how we might participate in caring for refugees. I'll follow up as we seek to love one another.

Learning about the wider world and its people and expanding our connections to those in our own communities whose backgrounds and experiences are not our own is a part of how we seek the Kingdom of God first. It's something we have to be intentional

about. We have to do it on purpose and open our hearts to God's leading and the possibility of being transformed. We can be sure that's the work that God is doing - the vine and the branches. It's the journey of loving one another - and love is transformational.

Returning home is more than literally unpacking. It's also unpacking what we've learned about ourselves and about others. It's being honest about how our assumptions are challenged, how our judgments are misplaced, how our preconceptions and prejudices are uncovered and how we have to respond, and how God is calling us to deeper faith even when we have more questions, stronger hope in God's work in the world, and greater love for God and every person God loves.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.