

July 28th: City

Welcome, my traveling companions. We've been on a new journey together—our summer sermon series titled “Dis[place]d: Finding Home Together.” This series is meant to be a sojourn into the biblical story, and a tool to help each of us identify the displacement in our own lives, so that we might find comfort in God's promise of a future home.

When Pastor Heather introduced this topic, she defined this concept of displacement for us, saying that to displace something is to remove it from its usual or proper place, and this can apply to both tangible things like individuals and intangible things like emotions. Displacement can be temporary or permanent, but often the same underlying feelings apply to this sense of disorientation and confusion. So if you are with us this morning and identify with any of those feelings, or are going through an experience of displacement in your life, we invite you to enter into this time of meditation with an openness to God's presence and the peace that is waiting for you in this place.

Let's start our time together with prayer.

God of all places and space, there is nowhere that we could run or nowhere that we could be sent that would be outside of your loving embrace. You are present in every town and city in our entire world, and you fill each of us with your Holy Spirit. Remind us this morning of your enduring hope in all circumstances, and speak to us anew if we need to hear your comforting and challenging voice. Inspire us to be leaders in our own times and situations, so that all of your beloved children can be free and at peace. Amen.

As part of my role as Lead Pastor, I read and listen to a lot of expert advice about the concept of leadership. Before coming to Bremerton UMC, I had never been a solo pastor before, so I had a lot to learn. Fortunately for me, the Leadership space has exploded in recent years—but unfortunately, this has led to more and more voices that try to convince us that leaders should only look,

think, and act in specific ways. And although I am still early in my career, I can tell you, a lot of this advice is junk—well intentioned maybe, but still junk in my opinion. In some fields, you might hear lots of talk about getting up at 5am, doing cold plunges to awaken your creativity, biohacking for optimal energy, wearing a uniform like Steve Jobs, and other silly ideas that seem to change with every new trend. In other spaces, you might hear that leadership is all about being a futuristic visionary—having a design or theory that is so advanced, so far out in front of the current culture or zeitgeist that no one else can really understand it—they just don't get it yet. These kinds of leaders do sometimes succeed in articulating and executing their vision, but sometimes we just end up calling them weird or out of touch.

Moreover, I've come to understand that many of these ideas about leadership are pretty far removed from most of us—they don't make sense to people who lead local organizations, or lead families, or lead from within their 9-5 jobs. These kinds of leadership tips that are offered by eccentric tech billionaires on podcasts don't really apply to normal people who are just trying to get through another day or another week.

So today, I want to talk about an example of biblical leadership that I think is much closer to our daily reality and a kind of leadership that I think more of us can imitate in our lives. Instead of thinking about leadership as something that only a few chosen people at the top can do, I think it's actually more important to think about how each of us occupy some position of influence or guidance—and look more closely at how we can use that influence and guidance in small but powerful ways.

This type of leadership that I want to talk about is rooted in displacement. And not only is it rooted in displacement, but it is inseparable from it.

But first, let's look a little closer at our ancient context.

Our text for this morning comes from the New Testament book of Acts—which is a record of the early church in the decades after Jesus' death and

resurrection. In these chapters, we follow the stories of many early disciples and apostles as they tried to shepherd a movement of people and deal with many personal and political challenges. One of the main characters of the Book of Acts is the Apostle Paul, a Jewish man and scholar who had once been infamous for persecuting the followers of Jesus. He makes a dramatic conversion while traveling to the city of Damascus, and after this turning point in his life, he devotes his time and attention to sharing the good news of Jesus with others.

And from the time that Paul is converted to the time he dies, he's almost constantly on the move. He's a mover and a shaker, that's for sure. In his ministry career, he travels from place to place, city to city, village to village—the whole time preaching, teaching, and building relationships with local people. He doesn't stay in one location for very long, because he's always listening for where God might lead him next.

Biblical historians have worked out that Paul made four major missionary journeys—four separate times he sailed out and cruised around the Mediterranean—and these journeys sometimes lasted years, if not decades. These journeys took him through rough seas, unfamiliar cities, and situations where we might not be welcomed or treated fairly because of his religious convictions. But still, he embarks on these adventures because he knows that his work is part of a bigger picture, it's a mission that brings tangible impacts and leaves a legacy in these communities. He is willing to put up with a lot—including working multiple jobs, living out of tents, and even persecution, because he sees that this effort is worth whatever pain and sacrifice that he puts in.

In the first few decades of the early church, Paul is a force to be reckoned with. In such a short period of time, the movement of Jesus followers goes from an isolated Jewish sect to a continent wide phenomenon, and a lot of that is due to Paul's witness. But Paul can't do all of the work of ministry by himself, he's only one man and there are now dozens of local churches to oversee. And if you've ever read some of the New Testament epistles, you might know that

these early churches in these ancient cities faced many challenges, and they had some big disputes to work through. So as Paul continues to work with other Jesus followers and as he continues to establish and oversee urban congregations, he decides that he needs partners to assist him. These partners in ministry are crucial to the mission, because their ministry is just as important as the work that Paul is doing. Like Paul, they are on the ground, working in the mess of cultural differences, arguments between individuals, and overarching uncertainty about the future of their faith. Like Paul, they devote their whole lives to this calling, and they lean into this vocation of hope and liberation.

Acts chapter 18 gives us a peak into this dynamic, as we follow Paul from city to city. He begins in Athens, then goes to Corinth, then to Syria, and then finally to Ephesus. We meet some of these early colleagues, including two Jews named Aquila and Priscilla, both of whom had to flee Rome after the Emperor Claudius expelled all remaining Jews from that city. They join Paul on his journey, and eventually they begin to take on his roles of preaching, teaching, and mentoring newer disciples. And then, when they are still relatively new in their role, they meet another new disciple named Apollos. Like Aquila and Priscilla, Apollos was from a distant land and had settled in a new place—an unfamiliar city. When Apollos began to speak in the synagogue in Ephesus, it was Priscilla and Aquila who met with him to teach him more about Jesus, so that he might continue to grow as a teacher. Because of this mentorship, Apollos is then sent out to another city, and he continues the work that was started by Paul.

All of these leaders—Paul, Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos—they all know what it's like to be on a journey, both physically and spiritually. They know what it's like to leave one place and start over somewhere new. They all know what it takes to be part of a movement that is literally on the move. They all know that the cities and towns where their ministry takes them are full of people who are also on journeys to unfamiliar places and spaces. And so their leadership isn't something that happens despite their unique journeys—their leadership is directly intertwined with these unique journeys.

Here's why I think this is good news—if we want to be leaders like Paul, Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos, it doesn't take much. It doesn't take the kind of leadership that all the modern tech bros and billionaires and so called leadership gurus talk about.

Instead, this kind of leadership starts from a place of humility, where we recognize our own physical and spiritual journey, and where we recognize our own unique displacements, so that we can use those experiences to offer hope and wisdom to others who might be going through similar situations in their own lives.

You don't have to have a massive platform, with millions of followers, and a top rated podcast to be this kind of leader—because sometimes all it takes to make a difference is working one on one or with a small group of people. Like Paul, working with Aquila and Priscilla, or like Aquila and Priscilla working with Apollos, one relationship that you make can have a ripple effect that leaves a legacy for generations to come. One person whose life you touch can be enough to transform other people and other communities. One connection or one conversation can make a difference.

And you don't need to be an expert to be this kind of leader either. Paul certainly wasn't an expert when he received his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, Aquila and Priscilla were new to the faith when they started as Paul's colleagues, and Apollos needs some coaching before he's ready for work of his own. None of these people were perfect, none of these leaders had a ten step strategic plan, and none of them went to seminary for theology degrees. They were ordinary people who believed in something with their whole hearts. They didn't have to be on the front lines of technical advances or on the forefront of innovations, because they were leading from just a few steps in front, reaching back to others who were close companions on the journey. They taught from their own lived experiences of displacement, and that was powerful.

With this in mind, what does this mean for us—modern day disciples with our own journeys and our own displacements?

Well, as I mentioned before, each of us is a leader in our own way. Each of us is someone that someone else looks to for support and wisdom, each of us is someone who occupies some role or position of leadership—whether it's at work, or with your family, or with your friend circle, or here in our city—we all have the potential to influence others and make a difference.

As you prepare for another week, and potentially new opportunities to use your influence for good—I want you to think: is there one person in my life who is looking to me as a leader—is there one person I can be a leader to this week? Is there a person in my social circle or in this city that is going through something I have also gone through—is there someone who I'm just a few steps in front of in our shared journey?

And when you identify that person—ask yourself: is there something that I've learned recently from my journey that I could share to help them in theirs? Is there something that I know or something I understand that could bring them insight or bring them support? Is there something that is part of my story that could be helpful to someone who is just getting started?

Our city, just like the ancient cities of our scripture, is full of people who need help navigating life. Our city is full of individuals, and families, and organizations that could use some wisdom for how to cope with our ever changing world and the confusion that those changes can bring. Our city is full of neighbors who might be on the lookout for a traveling companion for their own struggles and circumstances.

So this week, be a Paul, be a Priscilla, be an Aquila or an Apollos. Be the leader that your own displacement has prepared you to be. Amen.