

I love Broadway and all things musical. So when Dear Evan Hansen was coming in March, 2020, I bought tickets to two shows. One for me to go alone that was up close. And one for Hannah and I to go to which were in the cheaper seats. Of course, we all know what happened in March of 2020. Everything shut down and I never got to see Dear Evan Hansen or the Color Purple which I also had tickets for.

Fast forward two and a half years and Clara, Hannah and I finally got to see Dear Evan Hansen a couple of weeks ago. It was so good. The first big number is called, "Does Anyone Have a Map?" and it is sung by the two mothers of the show. They are trying to deal with their teenage sons and doing the best that they can.

The chorus goes like this: Does anyone have a map? Anybody maybe happen to know how the hell to do this? I don't know if you can tell But this is me just pretending to know. So where's the map? I need a clue 'cause the scary truth is I'm flying blind and I'm making this up as I go.

Ever feel that way? Do you wish that someone would give you the map and tell you which way to go? Today we begin our Stewardship Series with the theme "The Way of the Saints." We are going to be looking at different saints of the church and how they walked this path of faith. As Spanish poet Antonio Machado said in one of his most famous poems, "Traveler, there is no path. The path is made by walking."

So we are going to walk the next four weeks together, hearing of some of the saints of the church who simply made the path by walking.

The first saint we will be looking at is Sarah Crosby. How many of you know her story?

Sarah Crosby didn't grow up in a religious home, but after a particularly difficult illness during her teens she began to take interest in her eternal well-being. And so, after hearing John Wesley speak and reading some of his works, she became a Methodist in 1749. In 1752, she began to lead her own Methodist classes, (a larger version of today's small groups.) Shortly after she started leading these classes, she had a vision of Jesus telling her, "Feed my Sheep." which she interpreted as God calling her to preach. But at that time women were not permitted to preach, so that wasn't an option.

Jump ahead 9 or so years. In February of 1761, she was sent to the town of Derby on a missionary quest and instructed to lead classes. The first class went well, and had about 30 students in attendance. The following Sunday, however, to her surprise over 200 people showed up for the meeting. This was a problem, because her normal way of leading a class was designed around teaching groups of 50 or less. And so, leaning on her call from God, right there on the spot she made the bold decision to preach to that group of people.

Now, that may not seem like a big deal to us today but it was back then. After she did it, she met with John Wesley on the matter, who somewhat hesitantly agreed that she did the right thing.

Sarah Crosby didn't have a map. She didn't know what she should do, she only knew there was a need and she met the need. Her willingness to respond as she did paved the way for Wesley to officially give women preaching rights in the Methodist Church in 1771. Sarah Crosby was the first woman to receive the official certification to do so.

Here's the point: when the occasion called for something extra ordinary to be done, Crosby decided to do it. You may even say she was determined that there was no other option so she had to do it. Though there was a risk, she answered the need when it presented itself. She didn't wait. She responded,

In today's scripture reading from the book of Acts, we discover that Peter found himself in a situation similar to that of Sarah Crosby. An unforeseen need presented itself and Peter had to make a quick decision about how he was going to respond. Once he decided what he was going to do, he knew that he, like Crosby was bucking the system.

Peter, a Jew, has a vision in which he's told by a voice to slaughter and eat animals considered ceremonially unclean. Appropriately, he responds, "Never!" But the voice speaks back, saying "Never consider unclean what God has made pure." My guess is that he wasn't sure what it all meant.

A few minutes later some unexpected guests knocked on his front door. They were Gentiles, Jews and Gentiles had very little to do with one another, but a voice inside his head told him to go with them nevertheless. They took him to a home of another Gentile, a soldier named Cornelius, who had been told in his own vision to send for Peter, a Jew, who would explain something very important to him. Anybody got a map for Peter??

So Peter started to tell them about Jesus. To his surprise, the Holy Spirit came upon them in the same way he came upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost. It's at this point that Peter was faced with a decision. It was clear to him that these Gentiles had been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. Normally, he would baptize whomever had received the Holy Spirit. The problem was, they weren't Jews.

You see, those who were gathered for Pentecost were Jews; the Holy Spirit came upon Jews that day. And only the Jews were the recipients of God's promise of salvation. So when the church first started, it was believed that one had to first become a Jew before they could be given the gift of salvation. The idea of the Holy Spirit going straight to the Gentile was unheard of.

So Peter was confused at first. But then he remembered the voice from the vision: Never consider unclean what God has made pure. Suddenly he understood, and then thought to himself, "Who am I to stand in God's way? Contrary to what I've always thought, these Gentiles are 'clean'. So in that moment he made the decision to do the unheard of ; he baptized a household of Gentiles.

The need presented itself, and Peter, like Sarah Crosby, responded and met the need. When God surprises us in this way, the moment demands a rapid response – a near-spontaneous commitment to give in a way we're not necessarily prepared for.

This latter kind of giving is what we might call the Way of Necessity – giving because the moment demands it and, if we don't respond, the moment will pass. The opportunity will have been missed. Who are we that we should hinder God?

This begs the question. Is there something extraordinary that God is calling our congregation to even now? I mean God's called in the past and we've answered, right?

Draft counseling center, assistance to Newspaper strikes, feeding the homeless and then moving into services for those experiencing homelessness through NOAH, becoming a reconciling congregation, becoming a sanctuary church, deciding that we needed a full time person in charge of children, youth and family ministries. God has called without a map and we made the path by walking it.

Maybe that's happened in your personal life. Maybe a friend had a house fire and you stepped up to collect donations or maybe even house them for a while. Or maybe you planned on serving lunch at NOAH and they ran out of food but you rushed around in the kitchen here and made it happen. Things pop up in our lives and we step up to the plate without knowing exactly how we are going to meet the need, but like Sarah Crosby and like Peter, we make the path by walking it because we don't have a map!

One of the things we vow as members of the United Methodist Church is to uphold the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness. Stewardship is about all of those things. It's not just about money. It's about how we support the church by showing up, by praying for it, by serving alongside other members and sharing the good news of what Central is doing to those who might not have heard of us yet. Today, I want to talk about the showing up part.

God is calling us to re-imagine our space. There is a housing crisis in the city of Detroit and there is a need for permanent supportive housing and affordable housing right here and right now. There is a need for a safe space for children and youth to come and learn about the love of God and of the calling of peace and justice upon their lives.

God is calling us to dream right now for what could be, right here on the corner of Woodward and Adams. What would mission-based housing look like right here on our property, surrounded by gentrification all around, to say that we are providing housing for the people that are already here.

Visioning for the future starts next month with two visioning sessions, November 5 and November 19th. They will be in person here at the church and live streamed for those of you who need that service. We need you to show up. We need all of you to show up. Let's begin to see where God is leading us by taking that first step. Don't wait for the other person to take on that responsibility!

I'll be honest with you. This is not my church, this is your church. Yes, I'm certainly a part of it, which makes it our church and which means that we work with each other. But as pastor, my main responsibility is to be the spiritual shepherd of this congregation until the time comes when God replaces me with the next person who will shepherd you. You will be around a lot longer

than me. The fact remains, this church belongs to you, the members and friends of Central. The ultimate responsibility of providing God-honoring, life-transforming ministry to the people who live in this community, falls on your shoulders.

It may sound like I'm personally trying to weasel out of doing difficult work, but I'm not. I'm just trying to help us move forward in a way that empowers you to do what you've been called to, and me to do what I've been called to. And when we're all living into our respective calls of God, imagine what could happen?

In Acts 10, a Gentile soldier named Cornelius heard God tell him to send for some guy named Peter, someone he'd never heard of. God knew the need of his family and laid it on his heart to respond. His was a response of obedience because no doubt he didn't have any idea why he was being asked to send for this stranger.

I believe that there are people in this congregation that God has already been speaking to. There are some Cornelius' in our midst who've been sensing in their spirit that God's calling them to be a part of this visioning for the future. If this is you, let me encourage you to respond.

Back to Dear Evan Hansen:

Does anybody have a map?

Does anyone happen to know how the hell to do this? I don't know if you can tell but this is me just pretending to know, so where's the map? I need a clue cause the scary truth is, I'm flying blind and I'm making this up as I go.

Let's take a first step, we make the path as we go, out of necessity, God leading the way.
Amen.