

“In the Dust”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
July 7, 2024 - Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

[2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Mark 6:1-13](#)

The last time I was at the home where I grew up, just outside of Denver, Colorado was six years ago. My father Bill had just passed away, following my mother Carol, who had died a few years before, and my wife Christine and I were there, along with her father and one of my brothers and his family, to attend his funeral and clear out the family home. Over the course of a few very long days, we sorted through all of my parents' belongings, deciding which of the items would be kept by one of us; which would be donated; which would be packed up into a moving truck to be hauled back to my brother's home in Missouri, later to be sold; and which would be tossed into a dumpster, and as both of my parents kept everything they ever owned (they weren't quite packrats or hoarders, but they were avid "collectors"), there was a lot of stuff to go through -- physically and emotionally -- and the whole time I was remembering experiences from my childhood -- good and bad -- and feeling not like Pastor Ken, as I am called here, or like Rev. Ken, as I was known by the congregation I was then serving, but as Kenny, the little, awkward kid who grew up in that house.

While it was comforting to be there with family members, and also to see at the funeral so many dear friends that I grew up with, who also still called my Kenny, it also challenged me to consider my own life journey, which had already led me up to numerous mountain vistas and also down through many low, dark valleys, since leaving my identity of Kenny and my childhood home behind many years ago. And as we drove away from our family's old home the last time, after all was sorted, packed, given away, shipped, or tossed out, I remember feeling grateful for so much that I experienced there, but also very happy that I had decided to leave behind the place -- and the person I was there -- and to continue stepping forward, and not backward, on life's journey.

I've always wondered, when reading today's gospel lesson and its parallels in Matthew and Luke, what Jesus must have felt like when, after leaving his hometown of Nazareth, having moved on from his identity there of being just a local craftsman to become a traveling teacher, healer, and miracle-worker, he

returned to see his family and old friends again, who seemed quite eager to tell Jesus that he was not really the life-healing, world-changing, miracle-worker that he had become, but that he remained just the Jesus the carpenter, the neighborhood kid who worked with wood. Surely, he must have felt belittled there in Nazareth. The gospels tell us that he didn't do many powerful things there, but that he then moved on from all that, just as he moved on from his life there earlier when he hung his tool belt up the wood shop the last time, and continued stepping forward on his own journey of building things and blessing lives in new ways.

Today's gospel lesson tells us that Jesus didn't linger in his hometown, and he didn't re-embrace his old identity there, but blazed a new trail and left his old life in the dust behind him. He then taught his disciples to do the same -- to go out and do the life-blessing work that God gave them to do in the moment, to trust in the hospitality of those who received them, but also to leave in the dust behind them those who would not welcome them and their ministry and to keep on moving forward as God called them to move forward.

This is a good lesson for us today, because we are all confronted in our lives with memories of who we were, others' expectations for us because of former identities, and our own feelings of being inadequately small and powerless to face the challenges of today and to do the life-blessing work that God calls us to in this moment. We could use the reminder that no matter who we were, or who others want us to be, we are as God has created us to be in this moment, made from the dust of the earth, including the dustiness of our old experiences, to be recipients and carriers of God's grace, and we are all called by God and empowered by God, just as we are, to move forward on our life journeys and the journey we share as a family of faith.

But will we leave the past behind in the dust, or will we stop and sit right where we are, perhaps even heaping dust and ashes upon ourselves as we lament that we are not as we once were? Friends, let us --individually and collectively -- rise up from the dust of our past and move forward. Let us embrace the challenge before us as Christ's disciples to continue his work of taking the dusty old things of this world and making new, beautiful things out of them. Let us be open to moving in new directions of God's choosing, even if those paths seem unfamiliar

and uncertain. Let us all move as my childhood pastor, the Rev. Dr. Richard E. Maurer, called me and the rest of the members of our church to move, ever going onward and upward, onward and upward. Amen.