

Message for September 10, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church  
“I’ve Been Meaning to Ask...Where are You From?” Rev. Trish Eckert

The prayerful poem that we heard as we first centered down for worship inspires me to share about myself in a similar manner:

If you ask me where I’m from, I’ll tell you I’m from Michigan, and as someone who struggles with geography, I find it especially helpful that my home state is shaped like a mitten and I can indicate to you where I was born (Pontiac) and where I grew up (Kalamazoo). I find it poetic that I was born in a town whose name was part of General Motors, and yet my grandfather worked as a tool and die maker for Ford Motor Company. Actually, he moved to Detroit from Chicago after his journey by ship from Ireland in 1918. My mother is first generation American – both of her parents are from County Down in Ireland, and many of my relatives were part of building the Titanic in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century at the Belfast shipyards of Harland and Wolff– not necessarily something you want to brag about, since the “Titanic” is a symbol of dire failure, but it’s part of my narrative and woven into our Irish heritage.

My parents raised me in a house filled with poetry, art, and music. Social justice, hospitality, and care of the stranger were central to family discussions and our practices. When I was discerning whether I should attend seminary, and enter a career beyond social work, my dad noted that would make me the 5<sup>th</sup> generation to enter the ministry on his side of the family. My dad attended Oberlin when they still had a graduate school of theology and graduated from seminary in 1958. My grandfather graduated in 1926 from McCormick Theological Seminary, my great grandfather from Yale Divinity in 1894, and my great- great from Andover Theological Seminary in 1848. Seems I was bound for the ministry at some point!

I grew up with 3 siblings and when I became a mother myself, I repeated the pattern with 4 children of my own. This December, my husband and I will celebrate our 35<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, and when you tack on our years since dating in high school, we’ve been together for 41 years.

While raising our children, we followed a myriad of career opportunities – moving from state-to-state as my husband served as a tribal social worker and therapist on a number of reservations. When I think about the power of place and how different lands and communities have shaped me, I am grateful for the beauty of the country we live in and the kindness of

strangers who often became friends during our years in Colorado, Arizona, Montana, Maine, Indiana, and New York. It is a joy to be back in the Midwest and finding my way around Milwaukee, using Lake Michigan as a reference point. And what a community I have found here at Tippecanoe – a place that inspired me to apply as soon as I learned of the pastoral position here, and a place that inspires me every day as we strive to know one another, minister to others, and come to know the people in our local community and beyond.

. . . *where are you from?* In light of living in so many states, I have sometimes struggled to answer that question, and my children especially have had difficulty answering that question. They come from many places and carry those places with them wherever they go. Much of what I've shared with you are just a list of facts, but underneath those facts are stories that make up my life.

At some point in our lives, most of us have been asked, *where are you from* and it can feel like a loaded question. I often wonder how Adam/humanity might have responded to it. Obviously, Adam was from the ground. But there are important details that merit attention, and God is in those details. God formed humanity from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life, making Adam a living being. How exactly did God breathe into Adam's nostrils? God utters things into existence in Genesis 1 but is more hands-on in this chapter. God forms humanity, makes all kinds of trees grow out of the ground, plants a garden, and lets water flow from the garden. Later, God takes Adam and puts them in the garden to till it. So, I can picture God carefully crafting different parts of the body, then kneeling over Adam and breathing the breath of life into nostrils.

Much of this story is about mutuality, symbiosis, and interdependence. Adam was formed from the ground and was, in turn, asked to till it. The Hebrew word *abad* has the connotation of doing labor for the land and serving it. Adam comes from the land and is sustained by it, but also serves the land. Similarly, there is a symbiotic relationship between other parts of creation. The earth gave rise to the river and the river, in turn, watered the garden. God is in the middle of this story breathing the breath of life but also promoting mutual, life-giving relationships between different parts of creation.

This question, “where are you from?” can be lifted up with intention and with an attitude of curiosity and openness. Curiosity runs rampant in the story we heard from the Gospel of John, and Jesus is the primary focus of such curiosity. John had already known Jesus as the Lamb of God and invited his disciples to meet him. The two disciples who follow Jesus apparently want to know where he is staying, but they ask questions only after he gives them permission. They are respectful of his space and enter it only at his invitation. It is the kind of healthy curiosity that is eager to engage others but is unintrusive.

The disciples call Jesus a Rabbi, a term that does not capture his true identity in John. Instead of answering their question (where are you staying?), Jesus says, “Come and you will see.” The Greek word for seeing in this context is *horaw/oida*, which literally means “know, perceive, understand.” Jesus seems to suggest that the disciples called him Rabbi because they did not fully perceive him. He invites them to his place so that they can perceive him. Jesus is inviting them to a deeper level of curiosity, one that entails a willingness to learn as well as unlearn prior assumptions. Such curiosity transcends superficial knowledge and requires greater investment of one’s time and resources. The disciples spent the day with him and called him Messiah.

Curiosity is contagious. Andrew, who followed Jesus, introduces him to his brother Simon. Philip introduces him to Nathanael, who wishes to know if anything good can come out of Nazareth. “Come and see,” says Philip. The subtext is: “Don’t arrive at premature conclusions about anyone, or otherize them based on insufficient knowledge.” Curiosity is also a two-way street. Nathanael hears about Jesus and approaches him, but Jesus had already learned about him enough to call him a person without deceit.

How do we cultivate deeper curiosity that grants a fuller understanding of others, especially those who look, dress, and think differently? It requires investment of sufficient time and resources to learn about them, a commitment to unlearning prior assumptions when needed, and a healthy curiosity that engages others while respecting their space.

In the coming week, I hope each of us will carry some of these questions around with us – they’re stated in your bulletin, and we’re going to take some reflection time for writing and then choosing a conversation partner to talk with, regarding the places and people that have shaped you.

*What's your story? Where's home? What makes you, you? How has the particularity of place shaped who you are? Whose are you? Who are your people? What assumptions do you need to disrupt? Where is God calling you to "come and see"?*

May this series help us to behold each other as images of the divine. May it help us strengthen our capacity for empathy and compassion. May it remind us of the power of asking unassuming questions. May it show us that courage is rooted in the heart. Through vulnerability and authenticity, may our courageous conversations lead us to glimpse hope, joy, and beauty—and to become the community God created us to be.