

Title: Crossing Borders (Youth Mission Trip)

Date: 6/18/2023 (Proper 6, Year A)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Genesis 18:1-15, \(21:1-7\)](#); [Psalm 116:1, 10-17](#); [Romans 5:1-8](#); [Matthew 9:35-10:8\(9-23\)](#)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/F5fZneicdek?t=1257>

Come, let us sing to the Holy One;  
let us make a joyful noise to the Rock of our salvation (Ps 95:1).  
**Amen.**

Sarah laughed to herself.

I resemble that reaction. It resonates with me.

I too would have laughed if someone had told me two years ago that I would shortly find myself co-parenting two teenagers and going on a mission trip with ten youths.

I would have laughed because I was 42, and in *My Best Friend's Wedding*, the character played by Julia Roberts had made a deal with her best friend that they'd marry each other if they were still single by age 28. You heard me right. 28. 2-8. I was 42, I was a woman, and I was a priest.

Then I met my fiancée Britton. And then I became **your** priest.

In my first interview to be your priest, the Search Committee told me about the youth mission trip. The mission trip was so important to this community that during COVID they set up tents and camped in the backyard of Susan and David Saxon, and of course it rained. But they kept going, and they did service activities around Austin.

They told me about the youths. They shared with me the beauty of the intergenerational connection between the older and the younger members of St. Alban's. They told me about how wonderful the youth minister is.

I know Lisa is amazing. She's an amazing person. She's an amazing youth minister. I've worked with her for a year, I've experienced firsthand how incredibly loving and organized and passionate she is about her ministry. I didn't know that I could think even more highly of her. Then I saw her spend seven days straight overseeing and teaching and caring for all these youths and adults with such love and grace and joy. It is not for the faint of heart or the weak in faith, and I'm so glad I didn't wait any longer to go on a youth mission trip.

On the first day of the trip, someone said, "Given that you're getting married in less than two months, I didn't think you'd come on the mission trip this year." Had I known how this year would unfold when I was planning it last year, I might not have committed to **all** the things I committed to for the past six months. In the midst of trying to dance through all these moving pieces, all I could do was keep going, and laugh.

It's been a long week, and I don't think I've been this sleep deprived since seminary. And it's been such a good, **good** week.

In today's reading from the gospel, Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and sent them out to labor in the harvest.

He didn't just say "Good luck" and send them on their merry way. He didn't send them out alone. He knew they needed spiritual companions to sustain them, so he sent them out two by two. He didn't throw them into the deep end. By the end of the gospel according to Matthew, Jesus would tell them to go out and make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:18-20), but at this point, he knew they weren't ready for the Gentiles or the Samaritans. He knew they needed some practice to grow into their ministry. So, he sent them to the lost sheep of Israel.

To be clear, it wasn't like he was taking it easy on them. He told them to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. It's one thing to know that Jesus gave them the authority to cure, to revive, to cleanse and to cast out; it's another thing to actually go out and **do** all these things. They probably would have been content to follow behind Jesus and watch him; being sent out to do what he did takes this whole following him thing to a whole other level.

Two Sundays ago, we the community of St. Alban's commissioned and sent out ten youths and seven adults. These laborers were sent into the plentiful harvest of Las Cruces, New Mexico, and El Paso, Texas. We labored in all kinds of places, in a soup kitchen and an animal shelter, at a mobile food pantry and Ronald McDonald House, and with the Rio Grande Borderland Ministries.

We chopped, and we cooked. We cleaned, and we organized. We sang, and we watched sunsets.

The theme Lisa came up with was "Mountains," and she invited us to reflect each day on verses of scripture that talked about mountains. She connected them to our life experiences in general and our experience of serving and living together this week. She used them to suggest different ways we can engage in the spiritual practice of mindfulness. Every night we shared our "highs and lows," which were called "peaks and valleys" on this trip. And on the last night, we also shared our Mount Everest, the peak of all peaks.

I shared that my peak was the entire trip, getting to know each person better by serving next to them and sitting in the car with them, by seeing them at their best and at their most fussy, most human moments. Sometimes the older we get, the more walls we put up. So, it's a blessing to be with people in the moments when they are the most themselves, the good moments AND the hard moments, the lighthearted moments AND the serious, vulnerable moments.

It's a blessing to see the pride they take in their work, the love they have for each other, and the care they have for those served by the nonprofits we volunteered with: the

people who come to the food kitchen and the mobile pantry and Ronald McDonald House, the animals in the shelter, the asylum seekers who will stay on the cots we cleaned and wear the clothes we sorted and eat meals from the kitchen we organized.

It's a blessing to watch them and their relationships grow, even in the span of a week, and to watch them share more and more of themselves, in what they say or how loudly they say it, in what they stop themselves from doing and in what they do.

I'll never forget the experience of Lisa telling the Godly Play story about Moses and Mount Sinai and the people of Egypt in the desert with the desert and mountains of New Mexico in the background. I'll never forget the experience of celebrating the Eucharist at sunset, the radiant light of God reflected at me in the faces of everyone there.

For that closing Eucharist, I chose a liturgy from a book called *Liturgy on the Edge*. The chapter title is "On the Edge of Faith: Outreach Services."<sup>i</sup> This felt appropriate because we were doing things that would fall under the category of "outreach." I was also drawn to the word "edge" because I had borders and boundaries and limits on my mind.

There was the border between the United States and Mexico, which was very real in that there are walls and checkpoints, and very artificial in that it is drawn by humans. There was the border between New Mexico and Texas, and billboards reminding us that the rights I have as a woman change as we drive back and forth.

When we go on mission trips, we also expand our boundaries. In terms of geographic boundaries, the neighbors we love as ourselves now extend beyond Austin to El Paso and Las Cruces, and to the asylum seekers on their way there. In terms of personal boundaries, when we open ourselves up to one another, we expand the boundaries of who we call "friend" or "family" and those walls we put up start to come down a little more easily over time.

When we go on mission trips, we also expand our limits. We may be asked to do things we haven't done or aren't good at. We may be asked to do things we don't normally do at home. Every challenge we face forces us to push our limits and to think about where those limits came from. Is it from being told, "You need a man to do that" or "That's woman's work"? If it comes from experience, do these limits keep us safe or stuck in place? Have we learned something or developed a new skill since the last time we pushed up against these limits? Can we develop a new skill or level up on an existing skill?

The more we face our challenges, the more endurance we build up and the more character we have, meaning that we have a better sense of who we are and what we're made of. What are we made of?

We are children of God. Through the Holy Spirit, we are endowed with spiritual gifts so that we might share the love of God, which has been poured into our hearts. In Christ, we have been sent into the harvest so that through our thoughts, words, and deeds, we might show the crowd that the kingdom of heaven has come near.

We don't need a mission trip to have this kind of experience, but we do need to intentionally find our way to these kinds of edges, and I know we can find them right here in Austin, in Buda, in Kyle. There are harvests right here, waiting for us, waiting to experience the hospitality and love and care that we have in abundance. This is one of our growing edges.

When we want to laugh like Sarah, when we think it is too late for this, when we think we can't possibly do that, may we find a way to cross those borders, expand those boundaries, and redefine our limits.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *Informal Eucharist* by Richard Carter in the chapter "On the Edge of Faith: Outreach Services" from *Liturgy on the Edge: Pastoral and Attractional Worship*. Edited by Samuel Wells