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Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. [Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. Matthew 9:35-10:8(9-23)

This weekend has been a unique homecoming for me. I've "come home" to places I've never been before. I've come home to this town and, most particularly, to this parish church.

For the first time in my life, I am attending a reunion of extended family with many nice cousins I have never met before. The reason for that I will soon explain.

As I've learned, my Pendleton ancestors—like so many people after the Civil War—found their way to this part of Virginia looking for a new start. The land here was less expensive and more abundant, and the terrain was less scarred by the battles and hardship of that disastrous war than were they had been living. Their offspring thrived and grew here. They taught in local schools, became community leaders, started businesses, and many attended this church. They worshipped from these pews, and they as lay leaders—the kind of parishioners without whom a church cannot thrive.

My paternal grandfather, Hammett Claggett Pendleton, was baptized in this church in 1905. He was baptized by a distant cousin, Rev. William Henry Knickle Pendleton who was the 9th rector of St. John's. My grandfather was a Claggett on his mother's side. His sister, Birdie, lived into the 1980's and attended church here.

None of this, as it turns out, I knew before the Covid Pandemic arrived, and like so many who found themselves disconnected, isolated and at times downright bored, I turned to Ancestry.com to explore my family roots. In her book *The Soul of the Family Tree*, Episcopal deacon Lori Erickson refers to genealogy as "the quintessential hobby of middle age." This has been proven by my adult children who have little-to-no interest in what percentage of European mix we are or where we first settled. At least they're not interested now, but that might change when they reach middle age. Erickson adds that genealogy can be "an invitation to imagine, to ponder, to learn not just who our ancestors were but who we are and who we might become."

My search, which became a journey, led me here this morning. In preparing for today, I've asked myself this: Is it possible to go home to a place you have never been?

Today I serve as rector of an Episcopal church in Exeter, New Hampshire, a Hallmark Movie New England town an hour north of Boston. I have thirty-two years as a priest under my belt, and I am a husband, a father, and a newly-minted grandfather. Life is good and full.

I've reached a certain season of life that when given instructions for what to buy at the store, I ask for the items to be texted to me on my phone. A text has become the modern-day shopping list. I keep the phone open as I move around the store. Because beyond two or three things—bread, eggs, fruit—I am likely to forget what I was told to pick up. I need a list.

To-do lists are part of life for many people. They help us plan and organize. Responsibilities can be divvied up among a few people making the larger task easier. A list can provide clarity and help afterwards to make sure things were done as they were intended to be.

And that brings us to the Gospel for today. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" was the recruiting and motivational pitch that Jesus offered up.

I've always loved that Jesus sent the apostles out with clear instructions: where to go, where not to go, what to say, what to do, and how to react if they were not particularly welcomed in the cities and villages they traveled to. "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news: "The kingdom of heaven has come near."

And here's that to-do list that Jesus drew up: Just...cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. No problem. That's all.

In the verses that follow, we see how Jesus was clear-eyed about the obstacles his followers would face. If doors would not open for them, move on. "Shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town," Jesus told the apostles long before Taylor Swift sang "Shake it off" to the faces of all the players and haters of the world.

Not all doors open to us. Some opportunities are lost all the time. Rejection hurts. Losing a job hurts. People can be mean and downright terrible. Who has been on a crowded airplane lately? There are many times—while driving, on an airplane, in line—when I come across really frustrating and frustrated people who want to project and dump their feelings and troubles my way. It is not always easy to wish someone peace.

There are a lot of unhelpful and unhealthy ways good people choose to cope when too many doors close, when losses add up, and life doesn't turn out the way they had once imagined it should. Some people bend and adjust; some bend and break.

Reflect on the Collect for Purity that we pray each Sunday: Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name.

From you, God, no secrets are hid.

The late Frederick Buechner, author, and one-time school chaplain in Exeter, shaped many in my generation of clergy. In his memoir, *Telling Secrets*, he says, “Secrets are not hidden from God, but they are hidden from each other, and some of them we so successfully hide even from ourselves that after a while we all but forget they exist.”

We all have secrets. Congregations have secrets. Families have secrets. Let me share with you one of my family's secrets.

The reason I have never been to this town stems from something that happened long ago, when my grandfather—the one baptized in this church—took his own life. It was in 1937 in Kentucky, when my father was four years old. Claggett, his father, was only 32 years old. I don't know how estranged he was from his Wytheville family after his first marriage had ended in divorce. Was he the prodigal son who never returned home after he squandered away all he had been given?

The rabbit hole of my pandemic-Ancetry.com-searching uncovered another secret. When my own father was born, my grandfather was serving time in a prison in Pennsylvania. Was that known here in town? Did local people talk, whisper at church Coffee Hour? Did talk cause a stir or feed gossip? No one living today knows.

What does God do with secrets? God un-hides them. What does God do with shame? God brings light to shadows and corners and darkness and offers us—if we are open to hear what God is freely offering through grace—peace, wholeness, and forgiveness.

In the process of becoming ordained a deacon or priest, there are books to read, hoops to jump through and exams to pass. The people charged with deciding whether you should be ordained or not find creative ways to ask a variation of this question: Is there something in your past that might cause you to have what is called a ‘savior complex’? Are you, in seeking ordination, trying to repair or redeem something? It's often a broken family system. People who want to heal often start out broken.

The question is asked because it is important to know and never forget that we are not in the saving business. We do not redeem. That work is Christ's alone with the help of God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

“Cast out demons,” Jesus instructed the apostles. I believe all of us have demons. They did not fade away in the ancient world and long-ago Bible days. We all have things in need of cleansing and making whole. We all have secrets. And the God we have been told about over the centuries, from Abraham to Jesus, is not one to disappoint. We pitch our religious tent on the ground of this audacious idea: At the heart of the universe is a Divine force who fully knows us—every part of us. Who loves us—from birth to death, cradle to grave—through scandal and heartbreak and triumph and joy.

I don't know how my preaching here this morning could ever heal the brokenness of yesterday.

My prayer is that, somehow coming to this town I had never visited before—on Father's Day—in the shadow of ancestors I had never even known about and are now laid to their eternal rest, I hope that whatever was so hurting in the life of my grandfather was forever healed and forgiven by Christ who welcomed him home—to a place he had never been. My prayer is that his sudden death long ago, wrapped in shame, a shame that impacted my own father's life from an early age—and most probably my own life in unspoken ways—that at the moment of my grandfather's heart-breaking death he rose with Christ and was met with endless and eternal love.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. Beloved, we are God's children now; 1 John 3:1-2

I suppose that is what I journeyed here to say, and in my heart believe to be true.