

Sermon “Stepping Over vs. Stepping Up”

Kirk of St James

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A number of years ago, I heard about a famous seminary experiment based on the story of the good Samaritan. It is a story that has always stuck with me, and I reflect on it from time to time, simply because it is something that we must learn and relearn over and over throughout our lives. The experiment itself was rather simple. They recruited seminary students for a study on religious education. First they completed personality questionnaires about their religion. Later they began experimental procedures in one building and were then told to go to another building to continue. On the way they encountered a man slumped in an alleyway (the victim's condition is unknown -- hurt, or inebriated--it does not matter). What matters is that he appears in distress. They varied the amount of urgency they told the subjects before sending them to the other building, and the task they would do when they got there. One task was to prepare a talk about seminary jobs, and the other about the story of the Good Samaritan. In one condition they told the subject they were late for the next task, in the other they said they had a few minutes but they should head on over anyway. In an alleyway they passed a man sitting slumped in a doorway, who moaned and coughed twice as they walked by. Only 10% of the people who were told to hurry, stopped to help the man. Ironically, a person in a hurry is less likely to help people, even if they are going to speak on the parable of the Good Samaritan. (Some literally stepped over the victim on their way to the next building).

The results seem to show that thinking about norms does not imply that one will act on them. We know what we should do but making the leap from thought to action can sometimes be tough. It may also suggest that "ethics become a luxury as the speed of our daily lives increases." People's awareness was also narrowed by the hurriedness they felt and they failed to make the immediate connection of an emergency with the person they were encountering.

Now, many subjects who did not stop did appear anxious when they arrived at the second site. They were in a conflict between helping the victim and meeting the needs of the experimenter. They could recognize that perhaps something should be done, but their need to complete the task at hand often caused them to overlook the person in need.

I find the conclusions of this experiment, often reflected in my own life. Life is so busy that often we go from task to task to task without taking time to look up and consider our surroundings. It is easy to develop tunnel vision, and forget the world around us. It has been a weird week, with headlines like “Alligator Alcatraz” making the news and we may find ourselves wondering how humanity has reached this point. How is there this much suffering in the world, and what appears to be so little love and grace to be offered? However, much like the Good Samaritan experiment demonstrates when our lives are busy and things are not touching on our lived experience directly it can cause us to step over the suffering of another.

Which is why the passage in Luke today is so deeply important. Although 2000 years have passed since the time of Jesus, and although the methods we use to share the good news may have changed over time—we are likely not travelling without purse and sandals and landing on people’s doorstep--however, the essence of the Good News has not changed. At the centre of the Christian message is hope offered to every person in the name of Jesus, and through that message the world is transformed. First with the work of the disciples, then seventy others, and finally all who would follow after including ourselves.

When Jesus sends the seventy out into the world, he is giving them power and a new identity. They will have to let go of the parts of themselves that hold them back and embrace new ways of living. For some maybe it was difficult to go into the world without items to fall back on. How many people would be comfortable travelling without taking anything with them? No money for food, or extra clothing. No planning ahead and knowing where you will

stop. Relying on strangers to give you shelter and nourishment. Sharing a message about the Good News that few if any had ever heard before. Maybe there was fear when someone needed healing that they would not be able to do it. Or perhaps just the thought of going into the world and trying to share this new message made someone's stomach twist in fear. Whatever they may have started out feeling faded, as they worked and as they shared the seventy found joy in what they were doing.

The original sending of these people into the world also had a deep sense of urgency, Jesus knew his death in Jerusalem was approaching, and that he will not pass this way again. If people are not willing to hear the message then it may be too late for them. "In Jesus' work, too, many of his contemporaries simply didn't want to know. Despite all his healings, and the power and shrewdness of his teaching, the way he wanted them to follow—the way which he knew would lead to God's true Exodus—was simply not the way they wanted...At the heart of his call was the message of peace. 'Peace to this house,' the messengers were to say, looking to see if there was a 'child of peace' there. Jesus' contemporaries were for the most part not wanting peace—peace with their traditional enemies the Samaritans, or peace with the feared and hated Romans. They wanted an all-out war that would bring God's justice swiftly to their aid and get rid of their enemies once and for all. We know all too well what it looks like to live in a world that does not seem to want to peace.

The seventy went into the world offering peace, curing the sick, and talking about the Kingdom of God. Their work had a sense of urgency, and our call as followers of Christ in today's world should as well. As with the Great Commission to go out into the world and make disciples of every nation this call in Luke today is also a part of our call. To share the good news, to offer peace, to offer comfort. However, that message does not always feel like an urgent part of our lives. As one person said "For many believers, the immediacy of the kingdom

dims with the passage of time. We are essentially very practical people, living in our own context or setting, changing as the situation dictates, yet living within parameters that we can see, touch and feel.” However, we are also called to that which we cannot see.

I came across a wonderful reflection this week that said “By going on a road less travelled, one where we travel into the world with vulnerability and fragility, armed only with a message, is always going to be the harder way. But this tells us that it is the message itself that must speak. It is the ability to liberate and bring life that needs to speak, not a show of power. And that is harder, there is more invested in that message. In fact, everything of ourselves must be invested in that message.” While the context has changed and we are likely not going to wander far and wide in quite the same way as the seventy, we are still called to share the Good News.

However, we also know what it is to live in a world where leaders reject peace, block food and aid, treat people without compassion, and make war with people they view as their enemy. In many ways the message of Jesus is just as hard to share today as it would have been during his time. However, that being said, we should not be discouraged—other followers of Christ have followed in these challenging footsteps before. Instead we continue to go into the world and share the Good New of Christ, we carry peace and offer it in any way that we can, we share compassion, empathy, hope and love remembering that God goes ahead of us. It may not be the easiest road but, it is the one well worth taking.