

A Life Shared

Job 42: 1-6, 10-17; Mark 10: 46-52

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I. Introduction

There's a wonderful scene in *Through the Looking Glass* where Alice meets the Red Queen and Lewis Carroll writes these words, "Alice could never quite make out in thinking it over afterwards how it was they began. All she remembered is that they were running hand in hand and the Queen went so fast that it was all Alice could do to keep up with her and still the Queen kept crying, 'Faster, faster,' but Alice felt she could go no faster and had not the breath left to say so." So, Alice and the Queen finally stopped, and Alice looks around and is a little bit surprised to find that she's exactly in the same place where she had started and she expresses this surprise to the Queen who doesn't really understand why she's surprised, and the dialogue goes on, "Well, in our country," said Alice, still panting a little, "you generally get to somewhere else if you ran very fast for a long time as we've been doing." "What a slow sort of country," said the Queen. "Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do just to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run twice as fast as that!" Well, I don't know about you but I often feel like I live in the Red Queen's country where I run as fast as I possibly can and don't get a single bit farther than I was when I started.

I thought it might be helpful as we live into our stewardship campaign this year to do a little reflecting on how we go about using our time. Stewardship is in church circles sort of the code word that we have when we're getting ready to talk about money, and that's part of it. But stewardship has to do with how we care for all of the gifts that God has given us, and time is one of those most valuable and one that we often fritter away the most recklessly. And it's my hope that as we reflect on time, that will provide some analogies for how else stewardship gets lived out in our lives.

Last week we talked about that classic time management image of a container into which we're trying to fit a bunch of big rocks and little rocks and sand, and if we put the little rocks or the sand in first we'd never have enough room to get the big rocks in, but if we put the big rocks in first then the sand and the pebbles find their right place and you can get everything into the container. And our time is like that. Our time is made up of really big, important stuff, and a whole endless string of little rocks and sand that fritter away that time. And you are probably all better at this than I am, but I suffer from an enormous ability to get distracted from the big rocks. I'm like, is it *Up* where there is that great dog that every time he's going, going, and going and he says, "squirrel, squirrel, squirrel," and that sort of feels like my life except it's "e-mail, e-mail, e-mail." I've actually turned off that wonderful button on my Outlook that pings every time a new e-mail comes in because I'm like the dog. I'm in the middle of a project, "ping," I've got to look at that, right? It doesn't matter if it's important. But what it does is it takes me away from the important thing.

So, we're talking about time because the work that God gives us to do is the big rocks. God's call to us is a big rock, and if we let our focus get distracted by the little pebbles, the big rocks never get fit in to our schedule. And going to church in the middle of a crazy schedule is just one more crazy thing that makes the schedule more complex unless we understand that as being one of the big rocks around which the other stuff gets built, and then all the pieces fall into place, or, as I said the other week, sometimes fall off the plate entirely, which is not always bad either.

So, we've been talking about some of the opportunities in the life of our church where we can do some of those important things that God invites us to do. And what I had suggested to you is that you not every week try to pick out a new thing in one of the pillars to do, but you've got that wonderful brochure in your program that lists all of the places that our sharing pillar, which does our evangelism work, all of the places that we can plug in there. And so, I want to again suggest that you pray over that and listen for where God may be calling you to use some of your gifts.

II. Making Disciples

There was an article earlier this year in *Christianity Today* that cited some recent polling data that indicated that many Christians don't invite people to church for exactly that reason, that they just assume everybody is too busy and that church is just another piece that they're going to have to fit into a crowded schedule. And I get that because church work can be quite consuming as we all know. But there is an interesting dynamic because what we often assume is that the things that give us life may not necessarily give life to the people around us, and in reality our evangelism, our sharing our story is about helping the people we love also figure out how to put the big rocks in the container first, because nobody's really good at this and we learn from each other.

This call to make disciples of all nations is, of course, the First Commandment that Jesus gives us, that as the disciples have collected around the Risen Christ at the end of the Book of Matthew, the thing he tells us to do is go forth and make disciples of all nations, and that's exactly what the disciples do. They go out immediately and start telling the story of Jesus Christ and what that means for them, and in that process the whole world is transformed. That, of course, is also our denomination's vision statement, that we are called to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. But it strikes me sometimes that it's easier for us to focus on the transformation of the world piece than the making disciples piece. The making disciples piece often makes us acutely uncomfortable. Part of that is because we've got such a rich array of examples of it being done badly. We have seen evangelism done as very heavy-handed and very judgmental and often very intolerant, which is again why I suspect that we struggle so much with this. But it is at the core of who we are called to be.

There's another interesting study I read this week that noted that 40 percent of the people who join the church came initially because a friend invited them. Forty percent.

We should've talked to our new members today and taken a little poll with them. But 40 percent of new folks come because a friend invited them. And only two percent of pew-sitting Christians actually ever invite a friend. Two percent. So, think what that would look like, think what our church would look like, think of what our world would look like if three percent or four percent or 10 percent of us, all of us, shared a little of our story with a friend and invited them to be part of something that was this big, God big.

I spent a wonderful night last night celebrating 30 years of the Metro Players, which is our drama group here. What struck me as I sat there was over and over again, the stories that people told about getting engaged in Metro Players not because they had any interest in drama but because Fran Cleaver went up to them and invited them. And over and over again, we hear these stories of her going up to people and saying, "Have you ever thought about being in a play? Because I have an opportunity for you. You look like a nun." And in that process, people get invited into this wonderful community that becomes life-changing for them. The process of invitation is at the core of who we are.

III. Healthy Evangelism

Our Hebrew Scripture lesson today is a wonderful example of what that looks like when it's done in a healthy way. And I will start off saying these are the lectionary texts, and if one was going to choose a lectionary text about evangelism, you're probably not going to go to the Book of Job, right? That's not where you'd start. But this is a wonderful passage at the end of the book where Job is talking to God, as you heard -- and I love that dialogue, by the way, thank you, although I'm pretty sure God is a bass, but other than that it was great. Am I wrong?

Okay. So, Job and God are talking, and Job has these wonderful three lines: He says, "I heard about you before. Now I see you and repent in dust and ashes." What Job is saying, of course, is I got the stories about what you were like before, I heard the stories. Now I'm seeing what you do, I'm seeing you face to face and that process has turned my life around. That's what repentance means, it means to turn around.

And I want to suggest that healthy evangelism has both of those elements, the hearing and the seeing. Kate Murphey, who heads this part of our church life, has been very helpful in unpacking this for us in a positive way. Hearing about who God is is the process of our telling our stories, it's a process of not telling you, "here is how you get saved." It's about -- I know it's a little scary -- it's about me telling you, what my journey is like and how I have experienced meaning and joy. That process of storytelling is an invitational process. It's a process of engaging you by sharing a little part of who I am. That can be hard too because that means sometimes being a little bit more vulnerable than we'd like to be. But that process of inviting people is, again, at the core of who we are.

But we also live in a world where frankly everybody or most everybody that we will meet has at least heard the story of Jesus Christ. We are not missionaries in a remote part of

the world speaking to a community that has never heard the story before. Almost everybody we will meet this week has heard this story. And we live in a town where words sometimes mean very little. We live in a show-me city, "I don't want to hear what you believe because you can tell me anything. I want to see how you live that out and that's going to make an impact." And that's the second part of Job's statement, "I heard about you and now I see you." Because part of what our evangelism is about is showing people that we live differently because we have encountered God through Jesus Christ and that we are a different sort of community because of who God is for us.

So, the other part of our evangelism program over the course of the last year, as many of you know, has been looking deeply at how we become a more rich and diverse community because that shares part of what God means for us. We're willing to look at issues of race and privilege and economics, we're willing to step out in faith as we engage areas of our cities that are in need of food and where people are homeless, and we engage in those ministries. We show people through the way we live our lives that the Gospel that we talk about is real and we've got to have both pieces of that. We've got to be able to show and demonstrate that the life I live is a different kind of life because of what God has done for me and we need to articulate this is why my life is different, so that people can hear the story and see the work and turn.

This is, of course, also exactly what happens in our Gospel lesson today. Bartimaeus is a blind beggar. He has heard who Jesus is. And we know this simply because of how he responds. He knows that Jesus is coming down the street and he immediately says, "Son of David, have mercy on me." He doesn't know exactly what Jesus is about, but he knows something special is going on here. And in spite of people trying to quiet him, he keeps shouting. Hearing the story has given Bartimaeus a sense of anticipation about what is about to happen. Jesus calls him and he says, "What can I do for you?" Bartimaeus says, "I want to see. I want to see again." And Jesus heals him. The power was not just words. The power was a reality. And then, the story ends with Bartimaeus following Jesus. He's heard the story, he's seen the reality and now he turns and he follows. That's what the process of evangelism, that's what sharing our faith is about.

IV. Conclusion

I had a district clergy meeting this week and our district superintendent, Joe Daniels, has just got back from a sabbatical, which was a really rich time for him as it was for me last year. He was talking about some of the books that he had read, one of which was by a philosopher named Dallas Willard, who does a lot of writing on spiritual development issues. And he shared a quote with us that has been sitting with me this week, that "the most important thing in our spiritual formation is to ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life." I like that line, "ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life." I only heard it four days ago so I haven't gotten really good at it yet. But I loved the idea because what it harkened back to is this image of the Red Queen, "Run, run, run. Faster, faster, faster, faster," and in the completely vain hope that if I pick up enough

speed, I'm going to get accomplished what I want to have accomplished. And what Professor Willard reminds us is that ironically the faster we go, often the less we get accomplished, and that if we can ruthlessly eliminate some of the hurry, we start to open ourselves up to a different reality in which the power of the spirit works through us rather than our own manic efforts. So, it's all about time, how we use it, how we ignore it, how we fritter it away, and when we do it right, how it can transform us.

Amen.