

Sunday July 3rd, 2022

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
“Wipe Your Feet!”

On December 29th, 1972, Eastern Airline’s flight 401 left New York for Miami, with a heavy load of holiday passengers and baggage. The aircraft was a new Lockheed L-1011 Tristar and was the pride of Eastern’s fleet. The flight was unremarkable, until the aircraft approached Miami Airport for landing; suddenly the pilot noticed the light in the cockpit, which indicates that the landing gear has locked into place, failed to light up.

To buy some time, the pilot commenced to fly large circles around Miami to let the flight engineer check to see if the light simply had a failed bulb or something worse was going on. Namely, without that light on, there was no way to know if the landing gear deployed. The flight engineer wrestled with the bulb for a long time, but it just wouldn’t budge from its socket. The copilot grew curious, so he left his seat and tried to help the engineer, but again to no avail.

The pilot also left his seat to check things out, and as you can guess, by this point the entire flight crew stood around looking at that bulb that refused to budge from its socket. Therefore, no one was in a position to see that the plane was losing altitude, and finally the plane crashed into the Florida swamps. While an experienced crew of high priced and seasoned pilots messed around with a seventy-five-cent light bulb, an entire airplane and many of its passengers were lost.

The crew obviously forgot the most basic rule of air travel- “Don’t forget to fly the airplane.” (Charles Paul Cohn, Making it Happen) I am sure you have experienced the fact that bad things tend to happen, when we lose our focus on what is most important. Distractions can be deadly; that is why we no longer permit people to drive and use their hand-held cell phones. We even have an expression to describe people who endeavor to take our focus off of what is important. We say they are “Driving me to distraction.”

This story from the life of Jesus that we read from Luke 10, has a number of important lessons, but one I am particularly captured by this time looking at it, is Jesus’ call to avoid distraction. Jesus is stressing here, that in the work of the Kingdom of God, we have a singular purpose; one which demands our full attention. A purpose which can easily get lost in the busyness of life, or by getting caught up in unimportant, and frivolous matters.

The passage in Luke 10 begins with Jesus sending out 70 or 72 disciples depending on the translation. The ancient manuscripts, from which we get our translation of Luke, differ on which number it was, but let’s say it was either 35 or 36 pairs of disciples. It would be any church’s dream to have that many pairs of willing missionaries, but even this number is inadequate for Jesus’ work, because he tells his disciples to pray for more workers.

Their God given mission was essentially to go ahead of Jesus, and prepare people for his coming. They were to go to villages Jesus was preparing to visit. Today we might call these missionaries, Jesus’ “advance team”. It is interesting to me that when Billy Graham used to come to major cities for a series of evangelistic meetings, his organization sent out a large team to prepare all aspects of the event. There were people who came to train volunteers to usher, to help with those making decisions, to undertake promotion of the event and so much more.

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In this passage, it is very clear that these disciples, Jesus' advance team, were to do two things. These two things were their focus. They were to preach the coming of the Kingdom of God, namely Jesus was here, and approaching their village, so get prepared; and they were to heal the sick in Jesus' name. That's it, nothing else. No Four Spiritual Laws, no complex systematic theology, no planting churches; just two specific things. Just preach the coming of the Kingdom, and heal the sick.

Now if you understand that Jesus is calling his "Advance Team" to a very specific message and purpose, the rest of the story, which can seem odd at first, begins to make sense. Jesus begins with a warning. He says the disciples are like sheep among the wolves; that is, they are vulnerable to violent and aggressive forces that seek to stop them. In other words, people will do anything to stop you, they will put obstacles in your way, but you must keep your focus; stay the course.

The scriptures are very clear that the coming of the Kingdom of God in Christ Jesus, upsets the "apple cart", so to speak. Upsets people's nicely ordered lives. It is no accident that the passage right before this one in Luke 9 has Jesus encountering eager recruits, only to have them turned away by the commitment demanded in the work of the Kingdom. One recruit didn't realize there would be no creature comforts on the journey.

Jesus said, "Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but I the Son of man, have no home of my own, not even a place for my head." Another man refused to go until his father was buried, meaning his family obligations took priority. He too was not prepared. Another man simply wanted to go and say goodbye to his family, but even this was rejected as a distraction. His hand was on the plow, but he was looking back.

The 72 disciples, in our story today, have clearly made the commitment to follow Jesus with every ramification of what that commitment entails. Therefore, before us today, in a final preparatory talk with the 72, Jesus reinforces his critical message about keeping our focus. The 72 are to take no money, or luggage, not even an extra pair of sandals. Resources are not their problem. Why; because God will supply everything.

Don't worry about being equipped, just go and do what you have been called to. Stop fretting about plans, preparations, and strategies; just get on with it. Then there is this odd statement from Jesus. "Don't stop to greet anyone on the road." Why would he say that? Isn't it simple common courtesy to acknowledge others? Yes, it is, but even that is a distraction. The disciple's work is so urgent that there is no time for idle chit chat.

There is no time to talk about the weather, or news of the day, or gossip about the village. None of this regular, normal communication, has any value to the work of God.

Then Jesus gets specific about what you should do when you enter a village. Here too it is essential to keep one's focus. So, he tells them, stay in one place, don't move around from home to home, eat what is offered to you, remain where you are wanted, and where there is a receptive audience. In other words, don't waste your time trying to find a better place to stay, or a place where the food is better. These are temporal matters, yours is a spiritual mission.

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Jesus is very consistent and adamant on this point. In Matthew 6, in the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks at length about not being anxious over what to wear, or what to eat or drink. He says, *“So don’t worry about having enough food or drink or clothing. Why be like the pagans who are deeply concerned with these things. Your heavenly father already knows your needs, and he will give you all you need from day to day if you live for him and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern.”* (6:31-33)

If you face a bad reception somewhere, just shake the dust off your sandals and move on. God will judge them, but you have more people to share your message with, and more sick people to heal. It is so tempting to obsess about the rough reception we get in some places because of our message. But ours is not to judge, nor to bring the increase. We are called to simply seed and water for the Kingdom.

So, press on, with urgency. I like very much what the late Keith Green composed in one of his songs entitled *He’ll Take care of the Rest*. Speaking of Moses standing barefoot before the burning Bush, feeling overwhelmed by the mission God has called him to. Moses begins to make excuses. I’m too old; I am not an eloquent speaker etc. Perhaps we too have felt this way when we know God is nudging us towards something.

Summarizing God’s words to Moses, Green composes, *“It ain’t no use bumping your head up against that cold stone wall. Nobody’s perfect except for the Lord, and even the best bound to fall. Remember he is divine; we are de-branched. He’d love to get you through it if you’d give him a chance. Just keep doing your best, pray that it’s blessed and Jesus will take care of the rest.”*

Now, if in Luke 10, this was where the story had ended, we could conclude that Jesus is just giving some more of his teaching to spur on his followers. This passage was nothing more than instructional material, but as we know the story goes on.

In Verse 17, the 72 disciples return, and joyfully report that their mission was a huge success. Demons were cast out, we can assume the sick were healed, and the Kingdom of God was preached. Jesus’ call was not just empty words. The 72 have shown this. The call to service was infused with Christ’s authority and power. Jesus even speaks of seeing Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Incredible! Awesome! Wonderful!

All because the 72 disciples, or missionaries, kept their focus, stayed the course, kept their eye on the prize. 72 ordinary people; yes, I said ordinary people. I should have pointed out to you that these 72 persons did not include the original twelve disciples. The twelve remained with Jesus while the others went out.

In other words, these were 72 unknown persons; known to God, of course, but unknown to us. We do not know their names, their place of origin, what they did for a living, or even why they originally decided to follow Jesus. As far as we know, they did not even have special training. The one thing they shared was a love of God in Christ Jesus. They had a shared commitment to the only thing that mattered, which were a willing heart and a focus on the mission. They were also filled with Christ’s power and authority.

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Now, I know that this was but a short mission. We don't actually know how long they were gone, but I think it is safe to assume the time frame was days, rather than weeks in duration. Let me state the obvious in saying that keeping our focus, on anything, gets much harder as time moves along. The longer we go, the harder it is to stay the course. Over time, it is easy to become distracted by the stuff of life, or the impatience to see results.

The lesson though is significant from the experience of the 72. The 72 were called on to sow and water the seeds of life, but the increase, the harvest, was in God's hands. "Just keep doing your best, pray that it's blessed, and Jesus will take of the rest."

I should also point out to you that this event in Jesus' life was preserved by Luke, not for his own edification, but rather for the benefit of the early church community. All the gospel writers preserved stories they believed the community of Christ needed to hear. And so, as the early church heard this story from oral tradition, or read from Luke's account, what lessons do you think they would have gleaned?

What lessons can we gather? What is the application of Luke 10? It is at this point that yours truly can get himself in a heap of trouble as I can cut close to the bone. The lessons seem obvious, at least I think they are, and I find this passage particularly meaningful right now in First Baptist's history. As many of you know, our fellowship is facing challenges and weighing opportunities.

Your boards, Managers and Deacons, have been working very hard to find some solutions and navigate this post pandemic world.

I really admire the men and women in this fellowship who are working so hard, and wrestle with difficult choices to keep our fellowship financially viable, and really making a difference in Norfolk. I get it, and we should be grateful for their due diligence. It is tough, frustrating slugging, but here is still my concern. Are we losing focus? If mission and ministry are our purpose, and our calling, is there an urgency to these matters?

If mission is the lifeblood of the church, are we essentially watching a burned-out light bulb while the plane crashes. I am not, for a minute, trying to dismiss the importance of our efforts at meeting real practical challenges, but maybe we should also be spending the same, or more effort on the work of the Kingdom. I wonder, if Jesus sat in on our meetings as we wrestled with what we consider weighty matters, what would he say?

I found a wonderful little poem that talk about this. Composed by Grace Troy, it is entitled *What Would He Say*.

*If he should come today and find my hand so full
Of future plans, however fair,
In which my Saviour has no share,
What would he say?*

*If he should come today and find my love so cold,
My faith so very weak and dim*

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*I had not even looked for him,
What would he say?*

*If he should come today and find that I had not told
One soul about my heavenly Friend
Whose blessings all my way attend,
What would he say?*

*If he should come today, I would be glad,
Remembering that he died for all
And none through me had heard his call,
What would he say? (Tales of the Tardy Oxcart, p. 318)*

What is he saying to us, with our present circumstance? Are we placing undue burdens upon ourselves? In the search to be pragmatic, efficient, responsible, all good things in and of themselves, have we forgotten the heart of who we are and what we are called to do? Maybe the best advice I can give us all is to “Keep doing our best, pray that its blest and Jesus will take care of the rest.”