

Sunday July 2nd, 2023

Matthew 10:40-42
“Offering a Cup of Kindness”

When you are a recently arrived pastor or missionary to a town or city you've never been to before, it can be quite an anxious time. There are so many local customs and information specific to the region that it can take some time to get used to your new surroundings. Laura and I experienced this when we first went to Quebec. Folks in the church kept telling us to try a restaurant called “Saint HEWBARE”.

We wanted to try it but could never find one. That is until we realized they were telling to try St. Hubert's, a competitor of Swiss Chalet in Quebec. The French accent was what tripped us up, something that happened on many an occasion. Added to these challenges can be the overwhelming anxiety that you want to make a good first impression.

This is the underlying cause of a rather amusing story that happened to a young new pastor recently arrived in his new parish. He had only been in the town for a week when the local undertaker called to say he had a poor man who died without any family, and wondered if the pastor could come out to the cemetery and do a brief internment. The new pastor, wanting to make a good impression with the undertaker, agreed to come.

However, the Pastor had never been to the local cemetery, and unfortunately, he got very lost. Arriving an hour late, he scoured the cemetery looking for the burial site. Suddenly, he noticed a couple of workmen, standing near a backhoe, at the edge of the cemetery not far from a neighbouring house. The pastor rushed over, and immediately apologized for his tardiness. Then he asked if he could say a few words before the men continued.

With confusion written all over their faces what could they do but let the pastor say his few words. The minister completed the little internment service, prayed a blessing, and thanking the men he rushed away to his next appointment. After he left, the one stunned workman turned to the other and said, “Since when is it necessary to have a blessing over the installation of a septic tank?”

Going anywhere in this world with the express purpose of representing Jesus can be fraught with confusion, anxiety, and no small amount of danger. The tenth chapter of Matthew is a detailed briefing to the disciples as they prepare to go forth and spread the good news of Jesus. If you read through the chapter, you quickly understand that following Jesus demands a great deal of us, even our very lives.

Judy Anderson grew up as the daughter of missionaries in Zaire. As a little girl, she went to a day long rally celebrating the one-hundredth anniversary of Christian missionaries coming to that part of Zaire. After a full day of long speeches and music, an old man came before the crowd and insisted that he be allowed to speak. He said he would soon die, and that he alone had some important information.

If he did not speak, the information would go with him to his grave.

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He explained that when Christian missionaries came a hundred years before, his people thought the missionaries were strange and their message unusual. The tribal leaders decided to test the missionaries by slowly poisoning them to death. Over a period of months and years, missionary children died one by one. Then the old man said, "It was as we watched how they died that we decided we wanted to live as Christians.

That story had gone untold for one hundred years. Those who died painful, strange deaths never knew why they were dying or what the impact of their lives and deaths would be. They stayed because they trusted Jesus. (Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching, p. 175)

And the history of the church is chock full of faithful men and women who went to strange new places, or hostile places, to tell others about Jesus, only to be persecuted, and in many cases martyred. Christians are still being sent by God into places from which they never return, and if you want to read some of the more recent experiences of such dedicated people, there are plenty of resources online, like *The Voice of the Martyr*.

In fact, our own Baptist heritage is one built on the ultimate sacrifice of many early Baptists who sought religious freedom, and soul liberty, at the cost of their lives. Again, all we need do is read some of the history from the Puritan days in England. The whole concept of religious freedom enshrined in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms was originally a puritan ideal, a Baptist concept.

Following Jesus, going out as his ambassadors, is dangerous and costly work. However, and here is the critical thing for us to understand from Matthew chapter 10, we are all, without exception, called to go forth. If you claim to be a follower of Jesus then you are a missionary, you are on a mission from God. Now, here is the interesting bit, at least in my mind. I think for the most part, Christ's followers are thinking of mission and service in the opposite way that Jesus called us to.

As a way of building an analogy that might help unpack what I am getting at; consider if you will, an image that I think most of us are familiar with; a medieval castle. Europe and England are littered with them. For some, only ruins are left, but there are a few that still are occupied and functioning, at least as tourist attractions. Now, what do we think a castle's purpose is?

Usually, a castle was the place the king, queen or regional lord lived. It was the seat of governance for a region or even a country. However, any building would do as a government office. No, a castle primary function was protection. A castle's whole reason for existing was to protect the king, and his subjects. The high walls, the drawbridge, and heavy gate, turrets, arrow slots in the wall and of course the mote.

Whenever a significant danger arrived, like an invading army, should local forces be outmatched in numbers and equipment, the soldiers and the upper crust of society could hunker down behind the castle walls. This also meant that most castles kept significant food supplies on hand and a tamper proof water source.

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This was in case the invaders decided to set a siege. A siege meant that the invaders camped out around your castle, and tried to wait you out, or made occasional attempts to breach your walls.

Should the outer wall ever be breached, most castles also had an inner keep, a sort of fall-back position which was the most secured area of the castle. This idea of a keep is well depicted in the second Lord of the Rings films, where the people of Rohan try to hold off the orcs at Helm's Deep. Now here is what concerns me. I think a lot of us fall into the trap of thinking of the church as a kind of castle.

Yes, we might agree that Jesus is the king of the castle, but even still, we tend to observe the enemy out there and long to hunker down and raise the draw bridge. Our mission work becomes then, nothing more than somehow drawing a handful of curious folks inside the walls, in the hope they will want to ride out the siege with us. Our posture, in other words, has developed into one of defence not offence.

The problem that exists, however, is the same as with a medieval castle. You cannot defeat the enemy if you stay behind the walls. The best you can hope for is the enemy will get bored, or run out of supplies and leave, maybe to only come back some time later. To defeat the enemy, you must ride out and meet them, engage them in combat. Again, I refer you to the second Lord of the Rings film, where Aragon urges the king to ride out and meet the orcs head on.

In military terms, battles are not won behind walls, or from headquarters. Sure, you can devise strategy and makes plans, but the battle is won on the front line. The church's mandate is not to remain in the castle but to ride out and conquer for Jesus. Remember in Matthew 16, Peter's Great confession that Jesus is the Messiah. Do you remember what Jesus said in response to Peter's confession? "Now I say to you Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it." The words translated as "powers of hell" here is literally "the gates of hell".

Often, we misunderstand this verse. We picture the powers of hell attacking the church, beating on its walls, putting us to siege. This, however, is not at all what Jesus is saying. He is telling us that we are the besiegers; we are the ones as his church, to break down the walls of hell itself. The church is the one on the offensive. As Tolkien portrayed it so powerfully in Return of the King; we ride out to the very gates of Modor itself, which is clearly a picture of hell.

I wish I had the acting ability of Viggo Mortensen who plays the role of Aragon to do the words justice, but do you remember the scene as the armies of men wait at the big black gate of Modor? As the gates slide open the men, begin to lose their nerve. Aragon rides to the front of the troops and speaks powerful words to encourage them; reminding them of whom they are and the challenge before them.

"Hold your ground, hold your ground! Sons of Gondor, or Rohan, my brothers! I see in your eyes the same fear that would take the heart of me.

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A day may come when the courage of men fails, when we forsake our friends and break all the bonds of fellowship, but it is not this day. An hour of wolves and shattered shields when the age of men comes crashing down! But it is not this day! This day we fight! By all that you hold dear on this good earth, I bid you stand, Men of the West!"

Jesus has his own proclamation which he takes from Isaiah 61. In Luke 4, Jesus is invited to read from the scroll and the passage selected for that day reads as follows. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has appointed me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, and the blind will see, and the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors, and that the time of the Lord's favour has come."

Does that sound like a defensive posture? Does it sound like Jesus is calling us to hunker down behind the walls? No, Jesus is calling us out. We are not the ones who should be timid and afraid. It is hell itself that should be afraid, afraid of us. For when we get going for Jesus, nothing can stop us. The gates of darkness that surround people will fall like those of Jericho.

And where you may ask is the front line? Where is the battle waged? It happens in the minds and hearts of our neighbours and friends, coworkers, and school mates. It happens when we go out into the neighbourhood, the coffee shop, the mall, and the kitchens and living rooms, and back patios of those we meet. We take the most powerful weapons there are into the fray, the weapons of hope and love.

And what is our battle strategy? Well, that was today's gospel lesson. Hospitality is our strategy. In the giving and receiving of hospitality, we enter the lives of other people. When we break bread together, we share our lives as much as our food. Simple acts of kindness, like a cup of cold water, open opportunities for relationships, and in turn, an opportunity for Christ's light to shine in dark hearts. As representatives, ambassadors for Christ when they meet us, they meet Jesus.

Our care, our kindness, our generosity, our fellowship: will lead those we meet to wonder what the source of our hope is, and we can point them to Jesus. And let me point out that it is not to be great big projects that bring results. Simple acts of kindness can change lives. Kindness is an attitude that we can cultivate. It is an approach to life we can exercise.

It is said that Gandhi was stepping aboard a train one day, when one of his shoes slipped off and landed on the track. He was unable to retrieve it as the train was moving. To the amazement of his companions, Gandhi calmly took off his other shoe and threw it back along the track to land close to the first one. Asked by a fellow passenger why he did so, Gandhi smiled and said, "The poor man, who finds the shoe lying on the track, will now have a pair he can use." (Tales of a Tardy Oxcart, p.330)

I am not sure I would have thought of such a response.

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I probably would have sulked, and maybe tried to stop the train, or decide for someone I knew to retrieve the lost shoe, all the while holding onto one useless one. When we cultivate kindness, we see even setbacks as an opportunity to bless someone else. It is an opportunity to lift the darkness a little, from the heart of someone.

Jesus is also indicating that we are in this struggle together. We are intimately tied to the work of the Kingdom. When I am assisting another servant of God, I am assisting Christ. We are brothers or sister in arms, so to speak.

And just like in many battles, there are spoils or rewards to be won. Jesus tells us that if we aid others in their efforts to share the Good News we will be rewarded. There's a word that garners our attention: rewards. What are these rewards? Well, the intent of Jesus' words is that by welcoming and supporting his servants, we participate in his Kingdom work. Therefore, we will receive the same reward as the disciples.

When we accept the messengers of God, we in turn accept Christ and the Father. In embracing the Kingdom, we have entered the Kingdom, and receive all the blessings of being a subject of the king. The spoils of this battle are joy, peace, mercy, grace, salvation and eternal life.

My Friends, it is time to saddle up the horses, and ride out into the fray, to meet the enemy head on. For, not even the gates of hell itself can prevent the mercy and grace of Christ, from moving in the hearts and minds of people.