

“Housecalls”

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2 Kings 5:1-14

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

[Jesus said,]

“Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.

Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and salute no one on the road.

Whatever house you enter, first say,

‘Peace be to this house!’”

Luke 10:3-5

Let us pray... O God,

As we remember the ancient promises how you make all things new through Christ,
may we be inspired to see how that is true in our own time and our own lives.

Wherever we go and in whatever situations we find ourselves,
may we be your helpers in bringing about new life through healing and peace.

Amen

In recent weeks, we have considered what life was like in Jesus’ day,
how the Roman Empire imposed taxes to keep everyone in debt –
controlling them that way, with military might to back it up.

However, Jesus offered a ‘Third Way’ to his followers

besides ‘fight or flight’ in such an oppressive situation.

He got them to follow his example of using creativity to heal and forgive
while trusting in God’s grace – defiant of death, even to transform the world.

The practical application of this – according to current scholarship,
was to send out apostles two by two, to help mend the rupture
between landed homeowners and the displaced homeless.

We have a clue in today’s Gospel text that this was Jesus’ plan
for planting the Church even as he headed to his destiny in Jerusalem.

In his guidance to those he sent ahead of him, he said:

“Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and salute no one on the road.” [Lk 10:4].

Why else would Jesus discourage his missionaries from talking to fellow travelers
if it wasn’t to emphasize cultivating relationships with the people
in the homes and farms they found along the way.

They would provide healing and teaching in return for room and board,
and build connections that would be the basis for a community of faith –
a beloved community that would survive after Jesus’ earthly mission.

In what ways, do these dynamics speak to us, now?

How might they offer alternative courses of action to transform
individual lives and society in our own time?

Would Jesus want us to do the same thing, these days –
perhaps even like this?

Willard, p.2

There was a knock at a man's door one morning.

He opened it to find a young, well-dressed man standing there, who said:

"Hello, sir. I'm a Jehovah's Witness."

So the homeowner said,

"Come in and sit down."

Offering him a fresh cup of coffee, he asked,

"What do you want to talk about?"

The young man said,

"Darned if I know. Nobody ever let me in before."

<http://www.cyclefish.com/forum/General/Biker-and-Motorcycle-Humor-and-Jokes/House-calls-n-Church-116031-1.html>

I have been friendly to Jehovah's Witnesses who come to my door – always 2 by 2, and though I have talked with them, I never invited them in.

I admire their conviction and willingness to put themselves out there to meet others, but I am already a Christian and not convinced that following their doctrine would improve on that.

I love talking about the Christian faith, the stories of the Bible, the nature of the Trinity, questions like: 'Who is Jesus?', 'What about salvation for other religious groups?', 'Where is God?', 'How does faith make a difference in life?', 'How do we respond to institutional evils like racism and sexism?', 'What about healing people or casting out demons?', 'What about prayer and blessing?'

And more questions:

'What can we do to make it a better world, now?'

'What can we hope for in the time to come after death?'

'Do miracles still happen?', 'Is God still speaking...?'

For me, the best part of seminary was talking about such things between classes, over a cup of coffee in the refectory, or exploring them through the arts.

I imagine Jesus sent his disciples out to perform healings and cast out evil spirits in a way, like the 'knights-errant' of legendary Medieval Europe who went out to slay dragons and rescue people in distress.

In Chinese culture, such legendary characters could be poets or healers, too, but in more recent Chinese history, there actually have been such people who were called 'barefoot doctors'.

The 'barefoot doctors' were part of a localized effort of people within a community who had been given limited instruction in both traditional Eastern and Western medical techniques.

The people of the villages they served would have known them and would have readily received them for house calls

Willard, p.3

This program began in the 1930s,
flourished by 1960 to be present in 90% of China's rural communities,
but discontinued in the 1980s –
changing the focus from prevention to 'chronic' condition care.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barefoot_doctor

Such programs have their success, blossom, and fade –
still, China's 'barefoot doctors' served to inspire a declaration
by the World Health Organization (WHO) of the United Nations
encouraging local communities everywhere to promote preventative healthcare
and not just the absence of disease.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alma_Atta_Declaration

However, our lesson from 2 Kings tells about an outsider needing
specialized help from God's people.

Naaman – a Syrian army commander, was an enemy of ancient Israel –
who also suffered from leprosy.

A captured Israelite girl had become a maidservant to Naaman's wife,
and this girl encouraged her captor to seek healing for his leprosy
through the Prophet Elisha in Israel.

Correspondence was made through diplomatic channels
and Naaman was permitted to go to the prophet's residence –
like a doctor's office visit.

However, Naaman never sees Elisha –

he only talks to an assistant who tells him what he must do.

The most important characters in this story are the anonymous servants
who prompt events and make things happen.

Expecting a fancy ritual befitting himself as a great man,
Naaman was offended at first by the simplistic treatment
of dunking himself seven times in the Jordan River.

His servants, though, urge him to do what was asked – and so, he is cured.

God's healing is brought about as much by Naaman's humility and trust
as by the actions he was asked to perform.

Peace between Syria and Israel continued to be a problem,
but Naaman himself professed faith in God – though he asked to be pardoned
for his religious obligations as a state official.

Without criticism, Elisha bids him to go in peace.

In this narrative from 2 Kings,

someone outside the community of faith came seeking help –

like going to a medical specialist outside one's healthcare group.

In the Gospel narrative, that help is sent out to make house calls –
to find people in their need.

Willard, p.4

The elaborate instructions Jesus gave those 72 missionaries would serve as a model for the missionary efforts that would follow to establish the early Christian Church throughout the Middle East and beyond.

The 72 return from their apostolic adventures with excitement, telling about how they were able to perform healings and cast out demons, just like Jesus.

Then Jesus says,

‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.’

Perhaps another way of interpreting this statement is that Jesus was watching this happen, figuratively, as the powers of evil were being undermined by Jesus’ followers, now able to do what he could do.

In his speech to a graduation class at Union Theological Seminary, Paul Tillich told them that like Jesus’ disciples, they also had the ‘responsibility’ to bring about healing and cast out demons – especially, for those who are blind to their own ‘predicament’.

Tillich also urged them to know that this doesn’t mean they have to be perfect or untroubled themselves in order to do this work, but that it is precisely out of one’s wounds that one can recognize trouble and bring healing.

Does Jesus call us to go forth – like he sent out the apostles of old, to heal the brokenness in our time?

Or is that accomplished in subtler ways through our creativity and circumstance?

We each have opportunities every day to touch someone’s life, to encourage their healing.

What seems to be the formula is personal engagement – whether that was providing a healing for a desperate family, or ‘turning the other cheek’ as a daring challenge to the powers that be – while still leaving hands and hearts open for reconciliation.

For ‘progressive’ Christians, there is a fine line between personal salvation and social transformation, as to what is specifically meant by Jesus’ Good News – that we really can’t have one without the other.

Let us continue to share the Good News that our God seeks us to live purposeful lives, healthy in body, mind, and spirit, and to create in us empathy for others to have the same thing.

As we do this work, as we take the first step towards that Beloved Community of God’s Kingdom, we are already there.

Amen

Our lesson today from 2 Kings 5:1-14 is one of the great stories about healing in the Bible.

It includes a lesson in humility and that the healing power of God does not depend on a fancy display, but rather the openness to receive it by faith...

- 1 Naaman was the commander of the Syrian army.
The Lord had helped him and his troops defeat their enemies,
so the king of Syria respected Naaman very much.
Naaman was a brave soldier, but he had leprosy.
- 2 One day while the Syrian troops were raiding Israel,
they captured a girl, and she became a servant of Naaman's wife.
- 3 Some time later the girl said,
"If your husband Naaman would go to the prophet in Samaria,
he would be cured of his leprosy."
- 4 When Naaman told the king what the girl had said,
5 the king replied,
"Go ahead! I will give you a letter to take to the king of Israel."
Naaman left and took along
seven hundred fifty pounds of silver, one hundred fifty pounds of gold,
and ten new outfits.
- 6 He also carried the letter to the king of Israel. It said,
"I am sending my servant Naaman to you. Would you cure him of his leprosy?"
- 7 When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes in fear and shouted,
"That Syrian king believes I can cure this man of leprosy!
Does he think I'm God with power over life and death?
He must be trying to pick a fight with me."
- 8 As soon as Elisha the prophet heard what had happened,
he sent the Israelite king this message:
"Why are you so afraid?
Send the man to me, so that he will know there is a prophet in Israel."
- 9 Naaman left with his horses and chariots
and stopped at the door of Elisha's house.
- 10 Elisha sent someone outside to say to him,
"Go wash seven times in the Jordan River. Then you'll be completely cured."
- 11 But Naaman stormed off, grumbling,
"Why couldn't he come out and talk to me?
I thought for sure he would stand in front of me
and pray to the Lord his God,
then wave his hand over my skin and cure me.
- 12 What about the Abana River or the Pharpar River?
Those rivers in Damascus are just as good as any river in Israel.
I could have washed in them and been cured."
- 13 His servants went over to him and said,
"Sir, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult,
you would have done it.
So why don't you do what he said? Go wash and be cured."
- 14 Naaman walked down to the Jordan;
he waded out into the water and stooped down in it seven times,
just as Elisha had told him.
Right away, he was cured, and his skin became as smooth as a child's.

Inspired by Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

NOW, OF THOSE WHOM THE LORD WELCOMED, THERE WERE SEVENTY
[PLUS THE TWO HE AT FIRST DISCOURAGED].
AND HE SENT THEM OUT TWO BY TWO AHEAD OF HIM
INTO EVERY TOWN AND PLACE WHERE HE WAS DESTINED TO VISIT.

THEN, JESUS SAID TO THEM,
“THOSE WHO ARE TO BE HARVESTED
ARE ABUNDANT, BUT THE WORKERS ARE FEW.
PRAY, THEREFORE, THAT THE ONE WHO IS
THE LORD OF THE HARVEST
WILL SEND OUT WORKERS TO DO THIS HARVESTING.

DO YOU SEE THAT YOU ARE BEING SENT OUT
TO BE LAMBS AMIDST WOLVES?
DO NOT CARRY A MONEY BAG, A KNAPSACK,
OR EXTRA SANDALS
AND DO NOT GET INVOLVED WITH THOSE
YOU MEET ON THE ROAD.

BUT WHENEVER YOU COME TO A HOUSE, SAY,
‘SHALOM! PEACE BE UPON THIS HOME’.
AND IF THEY ARE CHILDREN OF PEACE,
YOUR PEACE WILL STAY ON WITH THEM.
OTHERWISE, YOUR PEACE WILL JUST REMAIN WITH YOU.
IN ANY EVENT, STAY IN THE SAME HOUSE TO EAT AND DRINK,
FOR A WORKER DESERVES TO BE PAID.
DO NOT GO FROM HOUSE TO HOUSE!

NOW, WHENEVER YOU COME TO A TOWN
AND THEY WELCOME YOU, EAT WHATEVER THEY SET BEFORE YOU.
AND HEAL THEM IN THEIR DISTRESS AND TELL THEM,
‘THE BELOVED COMMUNITY OF GOD’S KINGDOM
IS APPROACHING YOU!’
“BUT WHENEVER YOU COME TO A TOWN
THAT DOES NOT WELCOME YOU,
COME OUT BY THE ROADSIDE AND SHOUT THIS:
‘LIKE THE DIRT THAT CLINGS TO OUR FEET
FROM YOUR TOWN, WE SCRAPE YOU OFF!
EVEN SO, KNOW THIS!
‘THE BELOVED COMMUNITY OF GOD’S KINGDOM
IS APPROACHING!’

THE ONE WHO LISTENS TO YOU, LISTENS TO ME
AND THE ONE WHO REJECTS YOU, REJECTS ME;
BUT THE ONE WHO REJECTS ME,
REJECTS THE ONE WHO SENT ME.”

THEN, THE SEVENTY-TWO RETURNED JOYFULLY, SAYING,
“LORD! EVEN THE DEVILS NOW YIELD TO US
BECAUSE OF YOUR NAME!”

AND JESUS SAID TO THEM,
“I AM WATCHING SATAN, THE ENEMY OF HUMANITY,
BEING THROWN DOWN AS FAST AS
LIGHTNING FALLS FROM THE SKY!
LOOK HERE!
I HAVE GIVEN YOU THE MIGHT TO TRAMPLE
OVER SNAKES AND SCORPIONS
AND OVER ALL THE POWERS OF HATE;
AND ISN'T IT SO THAT NONE OF YOU ARE HURT.
YET DO NOT REJOICE BECAUSE EVIL SPIRITS
YIELD TO YOU.
BUT REJOICE BECAUSE
YOUR NAMES ARE KNOWN IN THE HEAVENS!”

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

[1] After this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to come.

[2] And he said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

[3] Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.

[4] Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and salute no one on the road.

[5] Whatever house you enter, first say, `Peace be to this house!'

[6] And if a son of peace is there, your peace shall rest upon him; but if not, it shall return to you.

[7] And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages; do not go from house to house.

[8] Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you;

[9] heal the sick in it and say to them, `The kingdom of God has come near to you.'

[10] But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say,

[11] `Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off against you; nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near.'

[16] "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me."

[17] The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!"

[18] And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.

[19] Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you.

[20] Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

[12] I tell you, it shall be more tolerable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

[13] "Woe to you, Chora'zin! woe to you, Beth-sa'ida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.

[14] But it shall be more tolerable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

[15] And you, Caper'na-um, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades.