



I hope there is someone in your life that will push you to articulate your faith from time to time. Not every day or every week but from time to time. Questions asked not to penalize you but rather to help you grow deeper and as a check to see if you are living what you proclaim. People hear what we say but they look at what we do.

For me, that person is my brother John. “What is the purpose of the church?” he asked me last week as the two of us were driving to have lunch with an aunt and two cousins. “Love God and love neighbor” I replied. “Why is it important that I love neighbor- what does that get me?” he continued. I proceeded to tell John about the variety of ways in which St. John’s has been involved in feeding ministries. “Ok, that’s good but why should I care if someone is no longer hungry?” We talked a bit about Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: food, shelter and safety being fundamental before a person can do much else. We talked a bit about “works righteousness” – the idea that you do good works to earn your way into heaven. The counter to works righteousness is that good works flow from love from God and my love for God in response. “Why does feeding a child make **my** world better?” John persisted. And then the digging deeper continued.

If a child is no longer hungry, I said, then the child has a better chance to learn. If the child learns and can read, then the child can fill out a job application when leaving school. If the young person can fill out a job application and get a job, then he or she is less likely to commit crime and end up costing me tax dollars as a result of being in jail. If the person can be a contributing member of society, maybe he or she can pay forward the help that they received as a youngster – and we all are better off. My part is to help others the best I can to become what God wants them to be. Not from a paternalistic or superior attitude but rather understanding that we are all becoming- we are all being transformed as we live. We have a choice in how that transformation proceeds by the choices we make. When we choose to love God and to love neighbor, we are helping to transform the world into a better place and that benefits all of us.

Part of the becoming is also to understand what is in my control and what is in God’s hands. And to understand that we are all connected and our world is a better place when we use our gifts and talents to help God’s realm become reality in our day and time. And to acknowledge and accept that not everyone will accept hospitality extended or have the same values I have. My job is not to worry so much about the outcome but to worry about whether I am living what I understand God has asked of me.

That's part of what both Paul and Jesus are talking about today. Hospitality was a very important virtue in Biblical times. For the Samaritan village to refuse hospitality to Jesus and the disciples was rude. Perhaps it was because Jesus had set his face towards Jerusalem. Jesus was focused on what was to come: trial, beating, cross. Perhaps it was because the Samaritans and the Jews were at odds over how to worship God. We see this today when people revile us because we proclaim the Gospel differently than they do. We see this when someone espouses a "my way or the highway" attitude – our values differ and contact is cut off.

The disciples query to Jesus about calling down fire upon the Samaritan village is over the top. Violence in response to a difference in values? Violence because you believe differently than I do. Not acceptable, says Jesus. Violence is not the answer to disagreement. Jesus had told the disciples to shake the dust off their feet if the village they went to visit did not accept them- not violence. Simply, move on. Pray for those who have not accepted God's love for them but do no violence. Set your face towards Jerusalem: towards what God has called you to be and to do.

A main challenge is remaining faithful to God when the world seems to have all the power and that power is being used in ways that contradict the values of love God and love neighbor. Paul reminds us that Christ has set us free. The fruits of the Spirit listed by Paul will help transform us and the world if we can set aside the vices of this world. What would our lives be like if we set aside envy, idolatry, jealousy, anger, quarrels and the other vices listed? If we could center our lives and thus our actions from a perspective of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? We may not know the outcome ahead of contact with someone operating from different values. But we can still offer kindness even when fondness is not an option, according to Karoline Lewis.

It is easy for us to sit back and take the attitude of wait and see. There isn't much that prompts us to get up and do something right now. Those basic needs that Maslow identified: food, shelter, safety, are largely met for most of us. Acting is taking a risk because we don't know how the interaction with another is going to turn out. Jesus, though, tells us to set our faces with his towards Jerusalem. To focus on loving God and loving neighbor now – not later. To do what we do – be it burying father or plowing fields within the context of loving God and loving neighbor. Dr. Lewis writes:

I began to wonder – what if Jesus sees the importance of time, of a minute, of even a second, not just for the sake of the urgency of his ministry, the urgency of the kingdom he wishes to bring into its fullness, the urgency of making sure that all know God's favor before those who reject God's favor will silence him for good, but because being human means such urgency – every moment really does count.

In the aftermath of Orlando and when we remember Mother Emmanuel, this is ever so much true. In the truth of our lives, so fragile, so frail, every moment counts. In the midst of transitions and transformations, every moment counts. In the reality of ministry and meaning that take on all of the contexts and circumstances of our lives, every moment counts.

Every moment has to count since God made the decision to become one of us. Jesus' call is not an insensitive plea to abandon that which is important to us, who matter to us, make a difference for us. Jesus' call to let go is a promise – that God becoming human

means that moments matter. Time makes a difference. And that even seconds matter to God. Why? Not for the sake of your service alone, but for the sake of your being in the kingdom God imagines. Every moment matters because every one of us counts.¹

Every one of us counts. What we do matters because we shape the world we live in- perhaps not in big earth-shattering ways but at least in the environment around us. Our world can be a better – more peaceful, cohesive, caring – place if we live according to God’s call.

Haywood Barringer Spangler writes:

Faithfulness may be expressed by a commitment to discerning God’s will. Faithfulness may be expressed by embracing the suspense or ambiguity that is part of life and asking ‘What is God calling me to do in this situation?’ ... We may have to discern God’s will through action. This challenges us to develop and maintain a God-centered perspective ... Sometimes we may prefer security and certainty to God’s empowering us for a risky calling. In seeking security and certainty, we may ignore or confuse our own desires and conventions with God’s direction.²

It’s much easier to do nothing or to counsel patience and restraint – after all patience is one of the virtues listed by Paul in the Letter to Galatians. But patience in this case is like looking back while plowing a field. Think of the times when you have been driving and needed something from the seat next to you. You leaned to the right and what does the car do? It slides to the right as well. You took your eyes off the road- and the car slides in the direction you were looking.

Jesus is telling the disciples: stay looking ahead. Stay focused on God’s hopes for the world and your part in making those hopes a reality. Even when you don’t know the outcome. Even when others make fun of you or denigrate you because you see the world differently. Do what God has called us each to do: love God and love neighbor. Be transformed by the love from God and your love for God. Help make this world a better place through your actions and your own life will be enriched. And that’s good news. **Amen.**

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4679> (June 25, 2016)

² Spangler in Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 177.