

**LESSONS FROM JESUS' SPIRITUAL JOURNEY:  
NOTICING THE PEOPLE ALONG THE WAY**

Luke 8:40-56

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Doug and I have been watching "The Crown" on Netflix. It's the story of Queen Elizabeth from the time of her coronation through modern times. We are currently in the late 1950's with the queen, and one of the recent episodes was fascinating. Queen Elizabeth was scheduled to give a talk at a British car manufacturing company. Her speechwriters wrote a speech that she barely looked at before approving it. She and her husband, Prince Philip, toured the facility, then she stood at the podium, in her fancy clothes, and delivered a message that said, in essence, "I know that many of you lead very dreary lives. You work hard jobs. But I want you to know that the work of you average people really matters to our country." It was a condescending speech, especially considering that the queen at that time really didn't do much that we would call work. It was a speech that emphasized the distance between the queen and the people, and showed how little she thought about the lives of those outside the palace.

She was vehemently criticized by a journalist whose story made front page headlines on several newspapers. To her great credit, she invited the journalist to the palace and asked him to bring with him suggestions as to how she could improve her relationship with the public. He told her, among other things, to televise her Christmas speech, and to open the palace occasionally to groups of people. This is a true story. Elizabeth ended up following all of the journalist's recommendations. She began to notice so-called ordinary people, and public opinion of her changed for the better.

The monarch of Great Britain serves also as the head of the Church of England, but it would seem that Queen Elizabeth had not spent much time reading about the life of Jesus. In her early days, anyway, she was not modeling her life after his. The Jesus revealed to us in the gospels is a Jesus who is always of the people. Now he gets away regularly, to pray and become spiritually renewed in solitude, but he never escapes behind any kind of palace walls. He never presents himself as better than anyone else or even separate from anyone else. Jesus of Nazareth walks the earth as a person who loves people.

Wherever Jesus goes, he notices people. He is never so preoccupied that he fails to stop when he sees someone in need. He may be tired, he may be reflecting on what he wants to say next, but he still notices the people around him. Walking into Jericho, he notices Zacchaeus up in a tree; he calls him down and has dinner with him, an event that transforms Zacchaeus' life. Another time, a blind beggar is sitting by the roadside. Hearing that Jesus is approaching he begins to yell out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" People tell him to be quiet, but he keeps yelling. Jesus hears this man's voice above the crowd. He stops in his tracks and says, "Call him here." And he heals the blind man. And one time in the synagogue, as all of the rich people are making a show of giving their offering, Jesus notices a poor woman who quietly gives her last two coins.

Our story for today is a story within a story, two examples of Jesus noticing people, responding, healing, restoring to life. Luke begins telling us about Jairus, a leader in the synagogue, whose daughter is dying. Jesus is surrounded by a large crowd, but Jairus - in his desperation - makes his way to Jesus.

Meanwhile, there's a woman in the crowd who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years. She also is desperate. She's no doubt heard of Jesus and his miraculous powers. Maybe she truly believes. Maybe she'll try anything at this point. What we know is that she touches the back of Jesus' clothing and two things happen. One, she is healed and two, Jesus notices. He notices that, as he says, "power has gone out from me." He looks for the person who touched him. The woman is afraid to be noticed because she is breaking the law. Because she is bleeding she is considered unclean. Everything she touches is unclean, and whoever touches her is unclean. She shouldn't be there.

But we know this about Jesus. Love wins over the law every time. If the choice is between healing someone or following a rule, Jesus will heal someone. If he has an opportunity to show compassion, to overcome the boundaries that separate people, he will, regardless of the criticism, the pushback, the risk.

By the time Jesus has the chance to respond back to Jairus, it's too late. The young girl has already died. Jesus walks into the house anyway, breaking his second law in as many moments, and he's about to break a third. He has been ritually contaminated by the touch of the bleeding woman. Now he enters a home in that ritually impure state, and not just any home, but the home of a leader of the synagogue. That's rule break number two. Now he touches a corpse, which breaks a third rule. Jesus touches the girl and speaks to the girl, and she comes to life. It is a miracle story, a resurrection story, a story that symbolizes the power of human connection in the person of Jesus.

I wonder how much human pain can be alleviated by this one change in behavior: one person paying attention to another. It's why support groups are helpful for

many who are grieving or experiencing another challenging situation. Support groups offer the space to tell your story, to speak the truth of your circumstance, and to have others really hear you. It doesn't change your reality, but when you are seen, heard and understood, it can completely transform your ability to cope.

What do you do when you see someone approach you on a city street, someone who looks homeless, someone you think is going to ask you for money? Most of us begin preparing our reaction. How to say "no". How to look away, or down, or pretend we're talking on the phone, or walk in another direction, hoping they think we didn't notice them.

One advocate for people who are homeless says this: "I always politely respond, look them in the eye, and wish them well. With confidence, I can say that this interaction is difficult for both parties. Typically, I feel embarrassed and guilty. However, what's even more difficult is that I might actually feel some of their pain or realize their situation more fully. If we make eye contact, or engage in conversation, then we have to admit they exist and that we might have a basic human need to care. But it's so much easier to simply close our eyes and shield our hearts to their existence."

And one man, formerly homeless himself who is now advocating for solutions to homelessness, writes this: "There is a direct correlation between what the general public perceives about homelessness and how it affects policy change. Most people blame homelessness on the person experiencing it instead of the increasing shortage of affordable housing, lack of employment, a living wage or the countless reasons that put a person at risk. This lack of understanding creates a dangerous cycle of misperception that leads to the inability to effectively address the root causes of homelessness."

Noticing people can be uncomfortable, and yes - it can be risky - but is there any question in your mind what Jesus would do?

Last Sunday, the front page story in the Plain Dealer was about Dr. Peter Pronovost, who is the chief transformation officer at University Hospitals. Among other impressive achievements including receiving a MacArthur Genius Grant, he is known for his ability to respond to individuals with a stated ethic of love. For example, after a woman showed up at a UH emergency room repeatedly, asking for food every time, social services arranged to visit her home, and help her find the resources she needs.

In an address to the City Club Forum, Pronovost said, "Stories are the most potent force for change in the world - they drive how we behave. Whether we see ourselves as powerful or powerless, whether we see each other as competitors or as collaborators - change the story and you change everything."

When we connect with one another on a human level, we're able to realize that each of us has a story that is valuable. Peter Pronovost walked through the hospital one day, talking to staff members. He saw a man in the hallway who is with the hospital's custodial staff. He stopped him and said to him, "What do you do here at the hospital?" The man looked down and muttered, "I clean the rooms." Pronovost looked the man in the eye and said, "Do you know who you are? You are an infection prevention specialist. If this room isn't clean, C. Diff happens, MRSA happens. You are helping people stay alive and well."

Can you imagine how differently that man felt about himself after that very human encounter?

I am loving our Spiritual Journeys series and especially the videos that tell some of our stories. I don't know about you, but I deeply value opportunities to connect on a deeper level, to realize what we have in common.

We all want to be seen and heard, to know that our stories matter. Next month we will be commissioning new Stephen Ministers. One of the reasons our Stephen Ministry program works so well is that we often pair Stephen Ministers with care receivers who have something in common. When I talk about a problem I'm having with someone who has already walked a similar path, it's easier for me to open up. It makes me realize that I'm not alone. And it gives me hope.

We all want to be seen and heard, at every age and stage of life. This past Thursday was declared "No One Eats Alone Day" at Learwood Middle School here in Avon Lake. A student survey revealed that 28% of students resonated with this statement: "Even around people I know, most of the time I don't feel that I really belong." So a student club encouraged their peers to talk to new people on Thursday, start new conversations, be aware of times they're judging one another. One person who comes to church here said he thinks it's important to talk about social isolation in the 7th and 8th grade.

Breaking down the barriers between us allows more space for the love to come in. There's no love in a world of have and have nots. There's no love in a world of all charity and no justice. But when we begin to see one another as people with common struggles, when our hearts begin to break wide open, well, here comes the love.

One of my colleagues who serves a UCC church in Wisconsin led a UCC delegation to the Spiritual Council of Churches in Haiti several years ago. Ostensibly, the

group was going to Haiti to offer help to the people who lived amidst a 40% unemployment rate and where more than two-thirds of the population did not have formal jobs; families who suffered under tragically high infant mortality rates and sometimes were forced to give up their children for American adoption because they couldn't feed them; people who lived under the crushing load of poverty and political oppression.

But Steve talks about his trip this way: "My most lasting impressions of those faith partners were of their courage and strength. They were Christians who had stood up against the corrupt Duvalier regime in Haiti to the point of imprisonment and attempts on their lives. They shared all that they had with one another in solidarity and hope, just like those early Christians in the book of Acts. They embodied the Spirit of Christ in ways that humbled me and inspired me in my own faith. It was a privilege to serve among them, life-changing for me, for which I am filled with gratitude.

One member of our little UCC delegation to Haiti was a banker and financial planner who went thinking he could share his financial expertise with the Haitian pastors and church leaders. The first church we visited was filled with singing, praying, celebrating worshipers of all ages. "*What was last month's total offering?*" our financial expert asked. The pastor answered, "*Twelve dollars.*" These Haitian church leaders had created a vibrant, faithful, servant Church out of twelve dollars a month. Who were the experts here? Who needed to learn from whom?"

We quickly realized that our attitude needed to change. If we were in Haiti to fix people, assuming we had all the answers, what we were really doing was standing in judgment of them. Once we realized that we each had wisdom to share with each

other, we could stand together in our common humanity and learn from one another's stories. (my paraphrase)

At the end of this Valentines weekend, I share this quote from Brene Brown: "We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness and affection."

Our connection to God will grow when we allow our hearts to be broken open, when we realize how much we have in common with one another, when we are willing to share and hear one another's stories, not from a distance but face to face.