

## WHAT MATTERS MOST

Luke 10:1-11

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At the end of this July 4th weekend, I am aware that talking about religion and politics is a minefield; everyone knows that! To walk in a minefield is to walk across land where explosive devices have been placed. You never know when you might accidentally step on one, and then - everything blows up. It seems to me that the minefields are getting thicker. There's almost nothing you can say that won't have the potential of causing someone around you to explode. We seem to be people on edge, people who look at each other suspiciously - we listen to one another for clues, words that indicate how the other person thinks about certain hot-button issues. And we seem to be quick to judge, quick to conclude, quick to assume that we know how another person feels, without taking the time to ask or listen.

I feel a deep sense of call to do what I can, within my sphere of influence, to help build bridges of understanding between people. To listen to people who think differently than I do in an attempt to understand their story, why it is that they developed certain opinions.

I believe it's one of the things Jesus would do. In his earthly life, he developed relationships with a wide assortment of people: he really saw them, listened to them, spent time with them.

It wasn't his primary purpose, though. First and foremost, Jesus was here to say, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." Or, to put it another way, "It's almost time for God to intervene in our world in a dramatic way, and we need to get ready." What

does all that mean? Scholars debate it, whole books are written on it. One thing it means is this: “Life is meant to be lived with a sense of passionate urgency. Care about the things that matter. Pay attention to the people who need you. Don’t just sleepwalk through life.”

Jesus wanted everyone to live with a sense of passionate urgency, putting first things first. Jesus saw things around him that needed changing. He saw people who grabbed too much wealth and power while others were starving and in need. He wanted that changed. And he knew that nothing changes if everyone’s bickering. Nothing changes if people aren’t working together. He saw value and worth in everyone, so he rallied every troop he could. He didn’t just stick to his tribe.

That sense of urgency comes through in our passage for today. We see Jesus rounding up a team, not just twelve this time, but 70. We know that most numbers in the Bible aren’t there by coincidence; they mean something. 70 is a shorthand way of saying, “I want as many people as possible on this team.” Everyone can play; no one is left out.

This is a Jesus who knows that he can’t do all the work himself. Not if he wants every one to hear the good news. And he does. He tells this team, “There are three things I want you to do. I want you to go from town to town, telling people the news - that God is involved in this world, with work for everyone to do, RIGHT NOW. Here’s how you do it. First, you sit down and eat with the people you’re talking to. You take the time to get to know them. You share a meal together. You listen to one another’s stories. Second, you see what needs they have and try to meet them. If they need healing, try to provide it. And third and last, you tell them why you’re there. Tell them

you have discovered a way of life that brings you joy. Tell them God has work for them to do that will bring meaning and purpose to their lives. Tell them the world needs changing, and there's a part for them to play."

Jesus sends them off with this pep rally, and the result is...well, one result is that 2,000 years later, there's a church in Avon Lake Ohio that bears his name. The word was spread, and we are the beneficiaries of generations upon generations sharing the good news, trying to live it the best they can. And now the marching orders are passed to us.

Jesus gives us the recipe for how to be the church - it sounds pretty simple, really: first, we are called to eat together, to sit down at tables with one another, and really get to know each other. Is there any better cure for the epidemic of loneliness?

One man in Nashville has decided to get to know his friends by inviting them over, one at a time; if you're invited to his house, you bring a favorite family recipe and the ingredients needed to make that recipe together. "Why that recipe?" he asks. "Tell me more about your grandmother." By the time the food has been cooked and shared, a friendship has deepened.

Have you heard of the worldwide organization called The Dinner Party? It was formed by a couple of friends in their 20's who each experienced the death of a close family member or friend. They wanted a healthy way to cope with their grief. Traditional grief support groups or counseling weren't right for them. So they began sharing dinner with others in their age group who have also experienced loss. They found that the regular practice of sharing a meal with others who were grieving, talking about the stages of grief at the dinner table, was healing for them. The Dinner Party is

building a worldwide community of 20- and 30-somethings who have each experienced the loss of a parent, partner, child, sibling, other close family member, or close friend. One participant says, "You keep coming back, and realize your heartache can also help create amazing friendships and forward motion in your life." It sounds, to me, like church, like the community Jesus is describing for us in Luke - church at its best, perhaps?

What could happen if we shared more meals together? What could happen if we invited more people to this communion table?

But church is more than eating together; the second step is what our Jewish brothers and sisters call "tikkun olam" or repairing the world - looking around us and asking who needs healing, what needs healing, and which part of that are we called to do? I love to see the ways members of this church are going about this sacred work - it inspires me to hear about the people who spend all day working at Murray Ridge, with people who have developmental disabilities - they find joy in the work and they bring joy to their clients. A teacher in Lakewood tells me about his relationship with two brothers at his school, both of whom are suffering from PTSD from what they saw of the war in their home country of the Congo. Stephen Ministers visit members of our church in nursing homes, who otherwise would feel forgotten. Volunteers organize a support group for the family members of those struggling with addiction. Next week we'll hear stories and see pictures from our Senior High Mission Trip - and what could be more motivating than 10, 11 and 12 year olds repairing homes in Lorain in the heat this week?

Don't let these stories be a secret! In these times when so much of the news seems depressing and the problems overwhelming, let people know that our congregation is an incubator for acts of kindness and works of justice!

And that is the third step - tell the good news. Tell people that isolation and despair are not going to have the last word. The problems of our world are daunting, but working on them, together, is what we are made for. I find great comfort in this quote: "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." What is your sphere of influence? Maybe right now your energies are best spent on raising children who will be committed disciples and citizens. Maybe right now your focus is on caring for a relative, ensuring dignity at the end of life. Maybe your heart is breaking when you see stories of the refugee crisis and you are motivated to write your legislators and send money to agencies that are providing relief at the border.

I find it interesting, how, if you keep your mind and heart open, you will notice opportunities to make a difference. I am about 3/4 of my way through a long engaging novel that has, as its central organizing theme, trees - and their rapid disappearance. The further I read, the more depressing it is to realize how much of the world's forests have been cleared, all for the sake of profit. And then - just yesterday - I heard an amazing piece of good news, and it's been verified by reputable scientists. We have the capacity to combat climate change by planting 3 billion trees. That's a lot of trees, but it's completely possible if we were to decide to do it. I'm currently researching which organization I want to be the recipient of my donation.

It's not up to us, alone, to solve the world's problems. Neither do we have the luxury of ignoring them. Which of them is currently breaking your heart wide open?

That's the one that's calling to you for your time, your energy, your resources. If you're looking for a first step, sign up to be part of the Weekend of Service.

What matters most is that we live with passionate urgency, caring about what's important and truly seeing one another. As Jesus did.

Let us pray. Thank you, Creator God, for giving us the gifts we need to make a difference for good. Fill us with the energy of your Holy Spirit so that we might love the world with imagination and vigor. May we see one another not as enemies or competitors but as teammates, all of us here for the same purpose. In Jesus' name. Amen.