

This morning's Scripture leads off with some pretty strong instruction that Jesus gives to his disciples-words about the mission they are called to-healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing disease, casting out demons. They are instructed to travel light and to not be concerned when people are not open to their message-God will judge **them**. He warns followers that the mission will not be an easy one. They will be like sheep among wolves, yet they are not to fear, for God values them more than the varied birds of the air. Jesus calls for their total allegiance. "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for his sake will find it."

Twelve years ago I was at a gathering of 600 United Church people, all together at Bloor Street United Church, home of one of the larger congregations in this country. Close to Queen's Park and just up from Bloor and Yonge's bustling intersection, it has been the site of influence and change over the years.

We were there for the opening of a United Church Conference entitled, "More Franchises than Tim Horton's." The important subtitle was "Vital Ministry in the Canadian Context." It is interesting to look at the statistics. In December 2006 Tim Horton's opened its 3000th store, that one in New York state. The United Church of Canada stats book of December 2006 showed 3405 preaching places. Now Tim's has surpassed us with 4846 locations in 14 countries. We only have 2711 congregations now in two countries, Canada and Bermuda. Tim's wants to open up another location here in Caledon East. I've gone on record as opposing it, not because I don't like their coffee, I just want to protect our local coffee shops and prevent the pollution of another drive through.

Back to Toronto. So we were there to hear about reality, to do a kind of check of where we are, but also to celebrate where there is vitality and learn from those experiences. The event opened with an interview, hosted by Peter Wyatt, then outgoing principal of our largest theological college, Emmanuel and Stevie Cameron, writer and journalist and member of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Toronto, right across from Roy Thompson concert hall. The question was, "Should the United Church just throw in the towel?"

These two persons had a conversation which really got around to what the church is doing and needs to be doing to find its place, its mission, and to continue in our time. The two had collaborated in starting up the 'Out of the Cold' program in Toronto 28 years ago when 7 churches each took a day to feed and house the homeless through the cold winter nights. When they first opened the doors at St. Andrew's the church managers said, "Well, here are some rubber mats for the floors for them to lie down on, but you can't feed them. We'll do this, we'll heat the place, but our church budget can't be used for any of this. The first night they opened there were almost 100 people who showed up. They had some dried soup mix to boil up and distribute among everyone. The volunteers were embarrassed. Two of the volunteers, who happened to be nuns from a nearby Roman Catholic parish dipped in to their purses and found \$47 to order pizza. The pizza was plain, nothing but cheese on it, because they wanted enough to go around.

At the time, I was reminded about my son's football team. Western university dresses 80, plus coaches, maybe 100 attend practices-they have to go to a special pizza 'take out'

that can supply them with 50 pizzas at one time. Anyway, perhaps football players do burn off more pizza in a night than homeless people.

In any event, through time things at St. Andrew's downtown settled in to a routine. After a few years the coffee/church tea preparation kitchen was worn out preparing meals for up to 300 people, one night a week, every week through the winter. So, a few years ago, that kitchen was replaced by a \$100,000 industrial kitchen that cost the church itself virtually nothing. The money was raised in six weeks without a major fundraising effort. Equipment was supplied and installed by good corporate citizens, donations were made by people who work in the financial district of Toronto and by all kinds of people who value their outreach efforts. Can we learn from their experience?

Stevie Cameron's answer to the question, "Is it time to throw in the towel?" No and the answer for St. Andrew's Presbyterian downtown has been multi-faceted, but she would rate high on the scale, the Out of the Cold program as turning that church around. There are 250 volunteers involved in that program. One third of those are medical students. Though many of those 250 are not normally part of the congregation on a Sunday morning, she maintains that they are part of the congregation. They are engaged in its mission and many are contributors too. And on top of that a significant number of those up to 300 homeless people consider St. Andrew's to be their church.

"..whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple---truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." If you are looking for a reward and it appears that in our society many people are, well then get involved in some church or community work that offers refreshment for those "little ones" in our society.

This interview was followed by a "cross-country checkup" kind of exercise where some people called in by phone to answer the question, "Is it time to throw in the towel?" Some participants came right down to Bloor Street church. Deborah Murray was one of them. She brought down a towel, a tea towel from her church but she indicated that it was not time to throw in the towel-she suggested that we need to often go out into the community to find our ministry. Deborah, did just that. At that time, she served a three point pastoral charge on the outskirts of Owen Sound, in a rural area. There was a suggestion in her congregation that they should somehow recognize farmers. So Deborah went out in the country, she went up some of the farm lanes to people she didn't really know and she told them that the church wanted to recognize them and offer them a blessing. She invited them to come to the community center in two weeks time and to bring along a calf or a lamb, perhaps a tractor and a bailer or whatever would be a symbol of their life and that the church would provide a lunch for them. She said, "we'll have a special service of worship and blessing." "I don't know anything about your faith, but come along and we'll offer a prayer and a blessing for you." She said, "In this day the way farming is, surely such a thing wouldn't hurt." They came, about 15 farm families who didn't have a connection with the church.

Consider the context of our Scripture, Jewish people were big on hospitality and protocol. To receive a person's messenger was the same as to receive the person himself. To pay respect to an ambassador was the same as to pay respect to the king who had sent him. The Rabbis said: "He who shows hospitality to the wise is as if he brought the first-fruits of his produce unto God."

We can get caught up in things that are big. Smaller, older homes are replaced with monster homes. We go for the variety of the big box store rather than the intimacy of the

local hardware or small clothing store on Main street. We go to those stores where they actually pay people to “welcome us.” We like big church buildings. We like those stories of churches growing at phenomenal rates. It’s hard not to like bigness in Canada, where the average entrée in the chain restaurant could feed two or three people.

Well, in today’s gospel, Jesus says he highlights the small. He celebrates small, trivial acts of faithfulness that might not get noticed by the world. For the church of Jesus Christ, small might even be better!

As disciples, we like faithfulness small. We can do small. But are we suspicious? Aren’t we called to those big things, like “turn the other cheek,” and love your enemies,” and “sell all you have to give to the poor and come follow me?” Can an act of genuine hospitality compare with casting out demons and enduring persecution?

Yes, in this gospel according to Jesus. Yes, in a world as broken and fragmented as ours, a simple act of kindness, a welcome to a stranger, here or on the street corner, a little genuine hospitality goes a long way. We are also asked to consider the implications of our decisions. Do we really need a fast food drive through? What does that add to community? When much of the world’s population does not have clean drinking water, think about allowing water bottle companies to pump from diminishing aquifers to give us convenience and then company profits. That is not wise.

Perhaps you are worried about the way things are going in your neighbourhood. Things are not the same as they used to be. We seem fragmented by different cultures, income levels and whether we are town residents or suburbanites. Why is it in an age of cheap long-distance rates and the Internet, when we can create community anywhere, we often don’t know the people who live next door?

I came across an article, “Won’t You Be My Neighbour?” It was about a fellow, Peter, in Rochester, New York. On the street where he lives there was a tragedy a while ago. One night, a neighbour shot and killed his wife and then himself; their two middle-school-age children ran screaming into the night. Though the couple had lived on his street for seven years, his wife and he hardly knew them. They had seen them jogging together. Sometimes they carpooled the children to and from school.

After the tragedy, the children moved away to be cared for by their grandparents. Someone laid a single bunch of yellow flowers at the family’s front door. But soon, the only indication that anything had changed was the “For Sale” sign on the lawn. Peter considered it quite a statement that this family had vanished, yet the impact on the neighbourhood was slight. He decided that he no longer wanted to live just in an individual house on a street, but instead wanted to live in community.

What would it take, he wondered, to penetrate the barriers between us? He thought about childhood sleepovers and the insight he used to get from waking up inside a friend’s home. He wondered, would his neighbours let him sleep over and write about their lives from inside their houses? And out of 18 neighbours he asked, 10 said yes.

One of the neighbours was a woman living three doors away who was seriously ill with breast cancer and in need of help. Peter now had a focused goal. Could the neighbours build a supportive community around that woman? And so they took turns taking her to doctors’ appointments and watching her children.

Many of you live in neighbourhoods where you do those kind of things for one another now. Covid 19 has given us opportunities to help those more vulnerable. Jesus calls us to these small acts. He loves us and expects us to love others. He welcomes us

and so we welcome others, not for their sake as much as for our sake. We can't help it; this is community, the answer to our own sadness, our loneliness, and our deepest desires.

God's heart is so big and full of love that it cannot help but offer grace and redemption and call us into communion with itself. And this communion grows. It grows when we offer kindness, humility, gentleness, and mercy, when other lonely lives become wrapped up in our own. God's love that was first opened to us is extended to someone else.

Sometimes the result is BIG, like the actions of Nascar drivers and pit crew last week, All 39 other **drivers** pushed **Wallace's car** to the **front** of the field before Monday's **race** at Talladega as FBI agents tried to find **out** who left a noose in his garage stall over the weekend. **Wallace** climbed **out** of his **car** and wept after the show of support. Usually the results seem small at first, Before you know it the cup of water we are offering to another becomes our salvation, as barriers fall, hands touch, and lives become entwined.

When we reach out, open our lives, receive and offer the grace of God in the smallest of ways, in breaking bread, in sharing a cup, we encounter another, we find communion, and receive the overflowing hospitality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Won't You Be My Neighbour?, New York Times, June 23, 2008