

Going Out

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Today's reading marks a core turning point in Jesus' young movement. Prior to this moment, Jesus' mission in the world was entrusted almost entirely to his inner circle of followers: the disciples.

Here, Jesus for the first time appoints a much larger group to go out into the world as his emissaries. A group of seventy.

And these are his instructions to them as they go out into the world.

First he warns them that they are going out as sheep among wolves, the people they meet may be openly hostile to what they have to share.

Then he tells them to pack light. To rely on the hospitality of strangers.

To come to a house and greet everyone with a word of peace.

To stay where they are welcomed, and walk away where they are shunned.

And to proclaim a simple message: “the kingdom of God has come near.”

And off they go.

I don't know about you but I feel like in the past few year I understand this feeling of being sheep among wolves.

I am associating it with that feeling of anxiety that arises in my chest when a conversation with people I do not know very well veers anywhere near politics.

You and I live in a moment when the simple act of speaking plainly of the things that matter deeply to you can feel like a treacherous thing.

It can feel perilous to stand up and speak out about what is most important. And it can be very tempting to quickly change the topic to the weather.

And yet. Like this early group of seventy. None of us is called to remain in our places of comfort and familiarity. The core direction of our faith is outward, out from this sanctuary, into a waiting world to be bearers of love, justice, and hope.

Transformation, both for us individually, and for the larger world we inhabit, can only happen when we risk being uncomfortable.

I think that is why in Jesus instructions to these apostles he sent out into the world, the first thing he did was strip them of what would be comforting and familiar. They were not to bring their own possessions, not to stay in nice hotels, or even with family and friends.

They were sent to walk into communities, to stay wherever they were welcomed, eat whatever was put in front of them, and to speak a word of peace and hope to all.

Jesus wanted them to leave what was familiar and comfortable, so that something transformational could happen with those they met.

When I was in high school I traveled with my church to a small community in Guatemala called Santá Maria Tzeha. At that time, it was accessible only by a long winding dirt, or more often mud, road through the rain forest, and the only electricity was provided by a gas generator that would run in the early morning to power a large grinder which people used to grind their dried corn into corn meal to make tortillas, a staple of their diet.

My church had been visiting this community since we had supported their return to the land and rebuilding of their town which was

destroyed during the Guatemalan civil war in the 80's, and the relationship continues to this day.

So many of my memories of that time are tastes. Each day we would visit a different home for each meal. The villagers knew that our weak stomachs couldn't handle their water unless it was boiled, so every glass of water or juice we drank had a subtle flavor of wood smoke from the cooking fire.

And then there were the tortillas. Which were delicious.

And most places we went, we were invited to try our hand at making them. A seemingly simple process of patting a ball of cornmeal dough back and forth between our hands until it formed into a perfectly round, uniformly thin, disk, and then tossing it onto a hot sheet of metal over the fire.

It seemed simple. But we Americans were —without exception— terrible at it. And day after day, we would sit there and struggle, and our hosts would gather children and neighbors, to watch, and laugh.

And after those meals, we would always linger for conversation. It was a core purpose of our being there to gather stories about the civil war, we were helping collect evidence for war crimes trials against former generals, and we were gathering stories for truth-telling that could lead to reconciliation.

And the stories were universally wrenching. Stories of immense trauma and pain, loss, suffering, terror.

The stories of people whose idyllic home became to borrow a phrase from the poet Warsan Shire: the mouth of a shark. Imagine what would need to be happening around you for you to leave your home one night, and simply run.

Those stories, many of which I heard several times over on return trips, completely transformed my view of the world. They engendered in me an immutable compassion for those who seek refuge from violence at our shores.

And we heard again, and again, that the opportunity to share those stories with the wider world, to have them heard by American ears, and held in wealthy, powerful hearts, was healing for the residents of Santa Maria Tzeha.

Not to mention that the village has won now several victories in court. And the lead prosecutor in the war crimes trial is a man named Edwin Canil, who as a six-year old was the only member of his family to survive the attack on Santa Maria Tzeha.

Given the discomfort and the vulnerability that community exhibited, again and again, for the sake of the healing of their world and ours.

It wasn't until we were heading home that I realized that whenever someone was going to share a story like that with us, they always began the meal by having us try our hand at making tortillas.

It was a very important piece of play that set the stage. A central ritual.

it was an act of disarming us, of revealing our basic and shared humanity. Of taking those of us who came from the United States —a world of almost unimaginable wealth and power— and putting us in a position of feeling helpless and lost.

It was no where near a balanced interaction, it would be almost impossible for it to be.

The vulnerability they were risking with us was many magnitudes beyond the minor indignity we endured in the smoke-filled kitchen.

But even that small moment, made something extraordinary possible.

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Transformation depends on vulnerability. Nothing will change if we are not willing to risk sharing ourselves with others. And nothing will change if we are not willing to admit what we do not know, and what we cannot do, to learn from and listen to others.

Transformation begins when we strip ourselves of the armor of what is familiar, what is comfortable and comforting, and go out.

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But notice two more details from Jesus instructions.

First, every interaction begins with a word of peace.

When you enter a house, say “peace be with you.”

There is no evaluation of the people, no question about who they are or where they are from. No deciding whether they are an 'us' or a 'them.'

No previewing their facebook wall to put them into some predefined category.

The first word is peace. The interaction begins with the assumption that we can live together peace.

Too often our conversations are pre-colored by the idea that someone is either on our team or not. We walk into a conversation already knowing whether we are going to commiserate with someone, or argue with them.

What would it be like to simply let your first word to every person be 'peace.'

The transformation of the world does not depend on your power of persuasion. It depends on your willingness to be vulnerable and honest and receive the honest vulnerability of others with grace.

It depends on your ability to be curious about the life of someone whose perspective you do not understand.

Imagine what it would mean to offer your perspective to someone without giving any thought to armoring it against critique, or couching in the most persuasive terms, or repeating it in familiar well-tested phrases.

But simply saying what you have known to be true, and receiving what is returned to you.

You might feel exposed, like you arrived in a new city but your luggage got lost.

Or like a sheep in a world full of wolves.

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And there is second piece of Jesus instructions. Notice that there is a limit to all of this. Sometimes fruitful discomfort and vulnerability becomes fruitless exposure. Even Jesus knows, sometimes you have to walk away. Not every place of every person will receive your peace with grace.

Many will strive to exploit it as weakness.

Or manipulate it in bad faith.

You probably know where these relationships are in your own life.

And Jesus instructions for us as we go out, include instructions on how to walk away, to shake dust off our feet, and move on.

To just stop replying to the comments.

Or to take a year off of that particular Thanksgiving gathering.

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I know a lot of people who live with the weight of the world on their shoulders, who feel that every wrong is theirs to personally right, that every fight is one that demands their presence.

And too often those same people are the ones whose spirits get devoured by wolves.

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We are a people who are sent out into the world. We are sent into places of discomfort, to transform and to be transformed.

See if you can pack light, leave behind the baggage of your preformed ideas about everyone else, leave behind the wit and snark, leave behind your ammo belt of opinions and ideas.

See who will receive you, when you are that vulnerable.

And let your first word to them be “peace.”