

BE060808

WHO DOO

13. Be Good News First

A couple of years ago, after listening to a talk by Dan, I looked more carefully at my behavior in mixed crowds of Christians and non-Christians. I noticed one day at the Y that there was this strategic distance I had created between me and this other group of guys talking. Why did I subconsciously create that distance?

After the next game, I made a conscious, strategic decision to walk across the court and sit right by the same group and a pleasant conversation ensued that built relationship. I realized that the starting point to loving lost people is to become a JUST WALK ACROSS THE ROOM kind of person.

The REASON we become JUST WALK ACROSS THE ROOM kinds of people is because we serve a JUST WALK ACROSS THE ROOM kind of God. For I remind you men and women, of God's commitment, not just to cross a room, but a universe for **you**.

John 1:1 – in the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God and the Word was God. ...(14) The world became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

This God who left the circle of comfort in heaven to enflesh himself in the 2nd person of the Trinity, our Master, Jesus the Son. And his mission he said was to:

Luke 19:10 seek and to save what was lost."

If we are going to partner in that enterprise, we have to become more like God... just WALK ACROSS THE ROOM kinds of people. People who risk leaving comfort zones to love outsiders.

Let's just open up the Bible and read about two examples of this happening in the early church:

1. **PHILIP: Acts 8:26-29** Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road — the desert road — that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."
 - a. Can you see JUST WALK ACROSS THE ROOM here? I don't think this is a comfortable for him, do you? He's living in Jerusalem, a big city with a thriving church community. It's a mega church. Flagship church. But God nudges him out of the comfort zone: "Go out to the desert south of town." Can you imagine the conversation? "God, what good will happen there? Jerusalem is where the action is! It's the desert! What if I die out

there?

- i. That's just the first walk that Philip makes out of his comfort zone.
- b. But then you see while he's out there, maybe wondering what he's doing there, he observes a man reading the Scripture. There's three strategic walls here:
 - i. one a racial wall. The man was an Ethiopian, he was black. Philip was probably Arab looking or as a Greek Jew, he might have been white.
 - ii. Two, an ethnic wall. The man was not Jewish. He may have been a convert because he had come to Jerusalem to worship, but as a born Gentile he was an outsider.
 - iii. Three a spiritual wall. The man was not a Christian.
- c. But the Spirit wants Philip to put all those walls aside and cross the road. To leave a zone of comfort to love a God seeker, ignorant of the good news. So by leaving a comfort zone, Philip was able to lead one man to Christ. And what good did that one walk do? Church legend says, that one Ethiopian became the founder of the Coptic church which is the oldest Christian church in the world.

Let's look at another example:

2. **PETER: Acts 10:9-44** Peter was up on the roof praying and he fell into a trance. And in a vision he saw unclean animals on a sheet and a voice saying, "Get up, Peter, kill and Eat!" "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, ***"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."*** This happened three times, and while Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, some men sent by a Gentile named Cornelius came to the door. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."
 - a. Why was this such a hard walk across the room that God has to give him a vision to help him move?
 - b. The vision was to get Peter to break down his boundaries against Gentiles based on his O.T. food scruples. Have you ever had a problem walking across the room based on scruples? I bet you have.
 - i. "My neighbors talk too much about drinking I don't want to be near them."
 - ii. "My coworker has a potty mouth!"
 - iii. "My neighbors don't discipline their kids right and I don't want them to influence my family"
 1. I was yakking with my neighbor the other night and his cousin came over and we started talking about his car. This guy could literally not finish any sentence without dropping the "F" bomb at least once, often twice. It was a real

education actually. I was amazed to find that one word can be used as noun, verb, adjective, AND adverb!

2. Now, my neighbor knows I'm a pastor and I could just feel him tighten up. I'm sure he thought I would be grossly offended. But you know, if Peter can associate with a unclean Gentile who violated God's food laws, then I could talk cars with a guy who swears like a sailor. I ignored my neighbors tenseness and just engaged in winsome conversation about a topic that interested him.

iv. The point is friends, a walk across the room or the street is a step out of the comfort zone. A walk into a world where the values are different and sexual habits are sideways and the philosophy of life is pluralistic and hedonistic and intolerant of absolutes.

The power of this story, is to realize that when God asked Peter to walk across the room, Peter felt he was being asked to associate with Gentiles; Unclean; Law breakers; Outsiders; The Dogs. God said to Peter, go there.

Maybe if you say, I could never do that, Rick, that would contaminate me. Why? Why would that automatically contaminate you? God did it when WORD became FLESH and it didn't contaminate him. Wait, I take that back. It DID contaminate him. He got so contaminated that Paul says he BECAME sin on our behalf.

I'm not suggesting we SIN to reach out... but lets get honest. Maybe the issue for us in the zone of the unknown isn't really being unstained by the world. Maybe it's just that we know that if we really cross the room or the street or the lunchroom, we just might be called on to **carry a burden** we don't want to carry.

The nasty truth about me is that when I hear the call to befriend someone outside my "circle," out of nowhere, a whole host of qualifiers rises up:

- "Hey, if I'm supposed to love outsiders, well, they better be nice, they better not hurt me, they better be safe, they better be stable, they better be *deserving!*"

Remember what the Spirit said to Peter: "do not call anything unclean that God has made clean." That's a reference to the food, but **more so** to the people standing at his front door! Now, they're not Christians yet, are they? No. So it's not like God is saying, they're already saved, or already filled with the Holy Spirit. No, that would happen later when they received the message of redemption.

But God is wanting him to see, these are CANDIDATES for purity! These are potential Christians. They CAN BE MADE pure. It's not impossible with God.

Don't write off those that God has not written off!

So that should just affect us as we develop friendships with people far from God.

- Are you OK with dining with Republicans? With Democrats?
- With blacks? With Whites?
- With rednecks? With bluebloods?
- With liberals? With conservatives?
- With homosexuals? With people from other religions?
- With gossipers or liars?

Will you go into the zone of the unknown? Will you respond to the knock at your front door? Cornelius may be waiting down there. What will God have to do to get you to move? Does he have to give you a vision of potheads and moralists and Muslims and pluralists and porn addicts and say:

“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean!”?

If that’s what you need, know this; He’s already given that vision once for all time – it has implications for food and for friendship. Just walk across the room! And pay no attention to issues of clean or unclean food, or clean or unclean people. God’s grace stands at the ready to cover all impurity. So just walk across the room and

- eat what’s put in front of you. And
- make friends with whoever knocks on your door.

So what principles do we extract from the stories of Philip and Peter about walking out of comfort zones into the zone of the unknown?

1. INTENTIONAL FRIENDSHIP.

Just recently that neighbor I talked about, whose cousin I’m not getting to know...I had him screened out. Weren’t my kind of guys, I thot. “Unclean.” The fact that it was two guys living in the same house started my mind rolling in an extremely prejudicial direction... I thought

Lord, they seem kind of stand offish. I could be nice to them, but as soon as they find out I’m a pastor they’ll hate me sight unseen. I don’t want to get into a bunch of political conversations – I don’t want the hassle.

Then, one day, Johnna sees these two guys shooting hoops out in the street. And she says to me,

Hey, you should go play with those guys sometime.

I think to myself, hmmm, I do like to play basketball. I could do that. But man, it was a long walk across that street! To walk, I had to be ready to develop friendship with people I was sure didn’t want to be friends with me. But the bigger issue God was asking was:

do you want to be friends with them? No strings.

I felt the leading of the Holy Spirit: Walk across the street! So I obeyed and introduced myself. I invited myself into their game of HORSE. I lost badly! but I found out that all my presumptions were wrong. The neighbor was recently divorced, had invited his buddy to rent his basement and they both were sports nuts. Neither went to church.

That one walk across the street lead to a friendship which lead to next steps of inviting them to several opportunities in our sports ministry and eventually coming to church and now Kris is getting to know Allen Creekers and I can't wait for what comes next!

But I can say the whole thing wouldn't have started unless God worked on my "unclean" problem. My comfort zone problem. Until God got me to the place I could say to my neighbor:

"I'm *open* to you. I don't lose who I AM but whoever you are, whatever you've done, whatever you believe life is all about, however you dress... I'm *open* to accepting you, journeying with you."

The next principle is

2. DO FAVORS

Peter invites those Gentiles into his house. I don't think we can fathom what a stretch that was to entertain "sinners" and unclean outsiders in his own home. But he did. You think you're putting yourself out by dropping cookies on a neighbors doorstep? – that's nothing! Try spiritually polluting your own home. Of course that's not what he was doing, but it would FEEL that way – we know Peter struggled with that feeling for years! (Gal 2)

But he overcame that with God's help to do a favor for an outsider. Walk-across-the-room people, are *constantly* watching for ways to do favors for those we befriend for Christ's sake. I don't want to over play this one example, but I have other neighbors (who are Christians), who began noticing that I let my neighbor borrow my mower every week.

They warned me about it, that he might abuse the privilege. I thot to myself:

Man, if you only knew how much I have wanted to connect with unchurched neighbors, then you would know that to me a broken mower is a small price to pay for their friendship. I said, "If they could just see Jesus in me, this a small favor to do for them."

You know what's ironic? That mower did break last year, in part because it was old and wear had two lawns to mow. But as is the case when we learn to give and sacrifice and tithe our incomes to God, I learned that I can't out-give God. This spring I got a better mower than the one that broke for dirt cheap and I'll loan that one out too if he wants it.

Favors, like Peter did for Cornelius make us GOOD NEWS before we ever share GOOD NEWS. What can you do?

In just a second, I want you to turn to your neighbor, and spend 30 seconds brainstorming. What ideas can you think of to love your neighbor practically. What favors can you think of? Ready? Go.

What did we come up with?*

You see how easy this can be? This isn't rocket science AC3. But it will mean taking the walk across the room into the zone of the unknown. It means giving away refrigerator rights. It means opening up your home. It means a conversation when you'd rather read your book. But you can't out-give God. Take a lesson from your finances. You live better on 90% of your money than 100. You'll live more fulfilled and happy loving others than yourself only.

Last principle is:

3. FOLLOW THE SPIRIT'S LEAD

Luke records how Peter was sympathetic to the Spirit's lead. If he hadn't been, the Church would have remained a sect of Judaism. Philip too. World changing events happened when one person is sensitive to the Spirit's lead. They didn't run formulas, they listened to the Living God. If Peter had run the formula, he would have said, hanging out with Gentiles is against the rules and thus there will be no Gentile Christians... too bad.

Once you've risked walking across a room to stick out a hand of friendship and done some favors, you need to FOLLOW the voice of Holy Spirit to know what comes next.

- Maybe it's give them a book on apologetics that deal with their sticking points.
- Maybe invite them to a seeker service
- Maybe give them the number of a good counselor
- Maybe telling them you'll pray for them

That's it:

- FRIENDSHIP
- FAVORS
- FOLLOW THE SPIRIT'S LEAD.

We can do this friends.

Kay Warren went to the Ukraine recently and saw a church doing work with the drug addicted kids on the streets of Kiev. She was impressed with the work, but then she noticed a woman watching them help the street kids, 20% of which were HIV positive. Warren writes:

At the basement entryway, an old woman stood at the top of the stairs, directed us down to the children, and watched us with a mixture of curiosity, anxiety, and concern. I wondered why she didn't do more. She knew there were homeless, drug-addicted youth living beneath her. Did she ever try to help them? Invite them in for a cookie? Or was she overwhelmed, fearful that if she showed kindness to one, all would swarm her? I wonder how many times each of us stands at the top of the stairs, watching, not getting involved. We can use our words (as the old woman did) or we can use our hands and feet as well. But being the presence of Christ in forgotten places provides a two-fold blessing—one for the person in need and another for the believer. Let's put our body language in sync with our gospel message.