

It's Always More about the Relationships

Matthew 9:35-38 and Isaiah 53:6

Ted V. Foote, Jr.

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First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

More than one highly competitive business entrepreneur is quoted (the actual quote containing profanity – but modified here) saying: “It’s not somewhat about ‘the money.’ It’s ALL about THE MONEY!” Such personality types often are hard-driving and never want their employees to forget how the top priority is the highest possible margin of profit. Yet let us not negatively stereotype astute entrepreneurs. The first known businessperson to use this phrase believed passionately in generosity and active charitable giving for the good of many, many people; and the phrase which he originated is useful in considering today’s Scripture. In July of this year, as our Peru mission-partners’ team traveled to Lima, then to Cusco, then to Quillabamba, and from there about 20 miles into the rural Andean range and high jungle, one of our in-country partnership leaders – Rusty Edmundson – had a different emphasis from stereotypical hard-driving businessperson. Rusty said, more than once: “We have work to do, but remember continually that it’s always proportionally more about the relationships.”

Through the years, I’ve heard the verses we’ve read this morning from Matthew, chapter 9, interpreted as a call for laborers to gather converts for what I call is “churchy – or pietistic – Christianity.” I question that sort of interpretation at this point in my life; so, indulge me, please a minute to define what I intend when I use the term, “churchy,” as distinguished from “church.” “Church,” in a positive sense, is “those who follow Jesus Christ in serving God.” When I use the term, “pietistic,” it is distinguished from “piety.” “Piety,” in a positive sense, is “a quality of depth and seriousness of faith.” “Churchy” and “pietistic,” though, are terms related to attitudes which promote self, or self’s preferences or self’s beliefs or even self’s style. Let’s also be clear: Presbyterians can hold on to “churchy” and “pietistic” attitudes as much as any other group or tradition of Christians. “Churchy” and “pietistic” attitudes tend to separate self and self’s own group from respectful interaction with those not inside the group’s professed faith-understanding, values, and practices. “Churchy” and “pietistic” can be the religious version of the highly competitive tycoon who believes, “It’s ALL about THE MONEY!” And what “the churchy” and the “pietistic” essentially say is, “Following Jesus Christ and growing in faith is all about my interpretation of God’s will and purpose and all about my group’s interpretation of Christianity. My preferred group and I get this ‘right.’ It’s ALL about the CHURCHY and the PIETISTIC!”

Of course, no one really says that, which is why it takes some effort to diagnose this tendency and go forward following Jesus as authentic “church” with authentic “piety” in discipleship and serving. One key to moving away from “churchy” and “pietistic” tendencies is comprehending the heart and source of Jesus’ ministry (and not beginning with “Jesus’ call for laborers”). Rather, begin with Matthew, chapter 9’s description of Jesus’ sense of compassion for all of the people (v.36). At the heart of compassion is the character of God’s respect embodied in Jesus, even though Jesus sees people’s lives as being like the prophet Isaiah described, “All (people) like sheep have gone astray,” or, as Matthew described, “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Starting and always holding onto God’s respect for God’s people will yield a type of compassion that does not seek to re-make the world in my image or your image or the image of what we think is the only “real” version of “Christian.” Starting and always holding onto God’s respect for God’s people will yield a type of compassion which models: (1) respectful relationships; and (2) partnering with others whose interpretations can vary from yours or mine – because we are each and all made in God’s image, and because Jesus embodies the compassion at the heart of God’s eternal love.

How do we live as church / as disciples following Jesus without being “churchy” and focused on our own preferences? How do we practice piety and seriousness in faith without being

“pietistic” and rejecting others whose faith expressions are different from our preferences? Mentally travel with me for a moment – not to Peru in 2017 or back to Palestine in Jesus’ lifetime – but to northwest England in the late 20th century. Only two years ago (in 2015) James Rebanks published, “The Shepherd’s Life,” subtitled, “Modern Dispatches from an Ancient Landscape.” It is, first, a memoir of his growing up in northwest England in the Lake District where Mr. Rebanks’ family was one of those in the area who raised sheep in the way sheep-raising has occurred there for centuries: utilizing common/ shared/ public/ unfenced land. Farmers have farmland that is definable and owned, but the grazing of the flocks occurs in the elevated region beyond the individual farms. “The Shepherd’s Life” is, secondly, a social commentary on the characteristics of those who labor as shepherds and who spend their lives in that endeavor. James Rebanks followed his grandfather and his father in the profession of shepherding, with a major exception. After completing nine or so years of public school, he did not advance to secondary school. When the relationship with his father became increasingly tense five years later, he began taking night classes at England’s equivalent of community college. Then he was able to receive a very unusual invitation to enroll at Oxford University, from where he later graduated, all the while planning to return to the farm, which he did. “The Shepherd’s Life,” is not a commentary on Isaiah’s reference that “people, like all sheep, go astray in life.” Neither is the book a commentary on Matthew telling how Jesus saw people as being troubled and unable to find direction, as sheep can be troubled and unable to find direction. While non-religious, Mr. Rebanks’ book, is a story about vocation and calling and relationships.

Our vocation – which means our “calling” and our purpose as human beings belonging to God – recognizes God being to us as a good shepherd is to sheep. While we are not ever sheep, any more than sheep are human beings, we like sheep go astray in multiple ways during life, and we are often troubled and unable to find direction. We need the good shepherd that sheep also need. Yet our vocation/ our calling/ our purpose as humans – different from what sheep have – includes a depth and intricacy of relationships, which are always most important because they are related to our “fellow-human-being vocation/ calling/ purpose.” That’s who we are and how we’re called to live. James Rebanks tells of his relationships with his father, mother, sisters, grandparents, other youth and adults, his girlfriend who becomes his wife, his teachers, professors, friends at the local pub, newcomers moving into the Lake District, etc. You could write or narrate a memoir of your life and relationships, as I can of mine. And this church can, as can other communities of relationships. Yet a primary question is, “Do we ‘get it right’ according to our purpose and calling?”

Earlier I said that on our Peru-partnership-journey this summer Rusty Edmundson told us, “There’s work to do, but what you’re doing here is always more about the relationships.” He was saying that the Peruvians did not require a dozen North Americans to visit them for four days of pick-ax, shovel, wheelbarrow, and rock-hauling work in order to get that excavation for a kitchen foundation accomplished. They could do it for themselves – over a day or so more – with no North American help. It’s always more about the relationships. So, on our last afternoon of work, when most of “the locals” were going at fever-pitch, I looked to my right and Rusty was visiting with one of the male seminary students, whose name is Jono Waite. They must have talked for ten minutes with Rusty asking him about his hometown, his background, his feeling about God leading him to attend Bible and theology classes, his sense of calling to serve the church in pastoral leadership. Through this ten minutes or so, the other male students were running wheelbarrows of concrete or shoveling sand and gravel into the concrete mixer. I was afraid the foreman of the project was going to call Jono out for standing around. After about ten minutes, Jono shook Rusty’s hand and grabbed a wheelbarrow from one of the students who needed a break. Off Jono then went, hauling, pouring, and going back for more concrete, time and again. Later Rusty told us about Jono and

other students making a decision to study Bible, theology, and pastoral ministry-work rather than move to the big cities of Cusco or Lima, because they feel a call to follow Jesus Christ for low or no pay in the area where they've grown-up, while not caving in to the pressures of the drug-trade-culture or the mining and forestry businesses with tendencies to exploit workers, ravage the land, and pollute the water. And how did Rusty know to convey that to our group? He was practicing what he was preaching: the concrete hauling would happen in its time, but Rusty's visiting with Jono truly practiced how it's always more about the relationships!

Friends, no one has to live on a mountainside or in a city of Peru, nor near the Lake District of England, or has to worship at First Presbyterian-Bryan, Texas, to learn how important relationships are, or how frequently we mess up relationships. Our vocation – which means our “calling”/ our purpose – as human beings belonging to God recognizes God being to us as a good shepherd is to sheep. We are not ever sheep, any more than sheep are human beings, yet we like sheep go astray during life, and we are often troubled and unable to find direction. We need the good shepherd that sheep also need. Yet also our vocation/ our calling/ our purpose as humans – far more than sheep have – includes a depth and intricacy of relationships; and those relationships – cultivated with respect – are always most important because they are related to our “fellow-human-being” vocation, and calling, and purpose.

During the late 1980s, a Presbyterian preacher, who is a caring disciple of Jesus, declared with sincerity, “We do what we do in ministry out of gratitude to God, which is so profound that all we can do is serve: as youth group sponsors, as choir members, as Habitat for Humanity volunteers, and food pantry and Voices for Children volunteers, as Presbyterian Women participants, as elders and deacons, as family members, as friends, etc. We do what we do in ministry out of gratitude to God, which is so profound all we can do is serve.” I think what I heard him say almost 30 years ago is largely accurate. I believed it completely then, but I've been thinking something additional lately. I think we also are drawn to faith with authentic piety and to serving with abiding respect in relationships out of a desire to be transformed. Troubled and without a sense of direction, as we often are, the Good Shepherd of all – with respectful compassion – is continually and mysteriously at work to transform us – not for churchy-ness or pietistic and stand-offish faith. The Good Shepherd of all is continually and mysteriously at work to transform us for respectful relationships; because, whatever work in ministry and outreach that any of us do, life-made-new from God's love embodied in Jesus is always proportionally more about the relationships! Even the generous businessperson, who first spoke about the importance of a sale's margin of profit was – not surprisingly – convinced that God's love freely given is powerful to transform each one's life. You and I can be similarly convinced, because we share a desire for God's respectful compassion continually to transform us through the many relationships we experience.– All honor and praise be to God.