

Tender Mercies:

Reflections on Twenty-Nine Years as Pastor

Genesis 12:1-9; Psalm 25:1-7; Matthew 9:35-10:1

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There's a lot of work to be done. Jesus looks on a multitude of human needs (9:36) and he is overwhelmed by it all. The people are scattered, like sheep without a shepherd. There are so many who are hurting and wounded. People are hungry, poor, ground down into the dirt by Roman power, struggling to make ends meet, living life burdened with sick religion and mean politics. Overwhelmed by despair and defeat, these people need something and they need it now. Time to get to work. Time to bring about change. Revolutionary change.

So Jesus calls his twelve disciples. Twelve, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, and Jesus calls them together. These disciples, ordinary – let me emphasize ordinary – people to bring about the revolutionary work of God's Way. Jesus empowers them to go out and make big speeches and organize rallies, raise money, get on the news, sit down with the PR types and put together some catchy TV spots, and get the newest, snazziest soft-ware programs and social media platforms. If all that fails, then he tells them that they'll have to grab their guns, take to the streets, and seize control. The needs are great, the time is short, and we've got to get this revolution thing going.

Of course, that is not what Jesus told his 12 disciples. Instead, the Way of

Jesus was and is to empower his disciples to go out and do the very same things he himself does – healing, restoring, reconciling, forgiving, embodying love and bringing the salvation of God. To use the language of Psalm 25, it is practicing the tender mercies of God.

Does the Way of Jesus Christ ignore the plight of people, stay away from politics, and focus instead on their hearts? That’s the conventional way we White American Christians have interpreted what Jesus was about. No. Yet, just because Jesus doesn’t go in for the politics of Rome, Jerusalem, or Washington doesn’t mean he has no politics. As you’ve heard me for years, Jesus has a different politics, a different discipleship, and is proclaiming a different kind of kingdom. It is more than the heart and it is different than seizing power. So what is it? What does Jesus call us to do?

In his book, *The Presence of the Past*, political theorist Sheldon Wolin, has a wonderful essay that talks about two ways of looking at politics that confronted one another during the ratification of the American Constitution. He calls the two ways “tending” and “intending.” For Wolin, a politics of “intending” is one in which a system of power seeks to ensure a future by bringing all governing authority under a single rational order. The word “intending” means to seek deliberately to bring about some desired effect or purpose. It means to stretch or strain toward a future with an effort that requires power. In other words, intending means to try to “fix” something; resolve or bring about a solution or make plans to get something done.

In contrast, a politics of “tending” is best identified with what we do when we look after another. Tending requires “active care of things close at hand.” We tend the sick, we tend children, we tend a garden, or we tend sheep. Tending has to do with closeness, relationship, nurture and care. It is patient and slow and attentive.

In the early 1960’s in Mississippi and Alabama, the newly organized Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which became known as SNCC (pronounced “snick”) practiced a politics of tending. It was what some have called a politics of small achievements. These young people, after a lot of training, learned to go to the “backwaters,” the small towns, out in the Mississippi Delta, and sat on the porches of the poor people, in their kitchens, or went out in the fields and chopped cotton alongside the workers and listened to them. Just listened. They listened to what the people were concerned about and what they feared and what they needed and wanted. They did not go to fix them or tell them what needed to be done or even organize them. They listened. It was slow work; it involved a lot of waiting. Attentive work. They also learned to pay attention to those who might become leaders; people like Fannie Lou Hamer. They had to learn to be judges of character.

Bob Moses, who became a legendary organizer said, “That was how I learned to organize... I heard my way through the world. I listened. I just listened and listened.” Rep. John Lewis remembered, “We were meeting people on their terms, not ours. Before we ever got around to talking we just listened.”

Political historian Romand Coles says of the slow work done in Mississippi and Alabama in 1962 and 63 and 64, that “ SNCC’s ‘slow’ paradoxically helped move U.S. history faster than it had moved on questions of race, gender, and class” than ever before.

By 1965 SNCC began to change. There was a new generation of workers who were not religious and who were impatient with the slow methods of sitting on porches and in someone’s kitchen listening to them. Stokely Carmichael, one of the earliest advocates of black power, made fun of what he called “localitis,” the time spent with local people. He was critical of “backwaterism,” of spending time in the backwaters, the little towns. Carmichael wanted to use force, power, even violence. Get Big. Move fast. Use Big Ideas, Big Methods, Big Solutions. This was too slow. He said that things needed to speed up.

It is interesting to me how most every revolution and revolutionary is short of time. Revolutionaries believe that the masses are inert, life is short, and if the change is going to happen it must happen quickly. Always violence is used. Indeed, there is no other possibility when one has no time and the whole world must be saved at one blow.

There is a contemporary French philosopher named Paul Virilio who says that the dominant form violence takes in our modern world is speed. Speed has to do with efforts at greater control and power, so we work harder and faster in order to get more done, in order to get ahead, in order to bring about the goals we pursue. Violence is speed.

I remember a story in the New York Times from a few years ago on how the CIA decided to use torture after 9/11. One CIA spokesman said, “We were in a scramble. We had never run a prison. We didn’t have the languages. We didn’t have the interrogators.” The story went on to say, that with the pressure to get results fast, the CIA decided to use the same torture techniques, which they used to train their own agents in resisting torture. They had been using the torture techniques used by the old Communist bloc intelligence services to teach agents how to resist those tortures. Because of the shortage of time, they just started using the same Communist torture techniques to torture the people they captured in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Violence and speed. Results fast. Big Solutions. Big Answers. We need to fix the problem.

And Jesus calls twelve ordinary people and empowers them to go do what he did: Go door to door, person to person and heal, forgive, teach, restore, reconcile, and show what salvation looked like. The Way of Jesus is the Way of Tending. It is slow, nurturing, caring, patient, and it listens a lot.

When God decides to change the whole world God starts with Abram and Sarai, a retired couple who were living in Sunnyside Estates in Haran. God says, “I’m going to change the world and I’m going to save humanity and I’m beginning with you Abram. You and your wife Sarai.

The verses we read this morning of this story tell us how meandering the

journey of Abram and Sarai and their nephew Lot was. They went from Haran to Canaan and camped there awhile. Then onto Shechem, and then to Moreh, where there was a big oak tree. After that they went over to the mountain east of Bethel and stayed there. When they got ready they went on down to Negeb. Eventually they went to Egypt because there was a famine in the land and Egypt had plenty of grain.

From reading this story, it is clear that God is not in a hurry. God works specifically, relationally, personally. No sweeping movements. No violent programs, dramatic actions, no Big Solutions just a wandering Aramean and his family and tents and flocks.

This is God's way. Around two thousand years later, God spoke to a teenaged girl and a young carpenter just starting out in life. They ended up in one of those backwater towns. This one was called Bethlehem and a baby was born to them out in a cow shed – far from the centers of power in Rome and Jerusalem. This is how God saves the world.

And this is what we are called to be about: a discipleship of tending, of small achievements. Tender mercies: caring, nurturing, patiently paying attention, and working slow, doing a lot of listening, healing, reconciling, and forgiving.

I'll be honest. I'm convinced that if I were not the pastor for twenty-nine years of this small church, I probably would not see this. I'm convinced that the reason I can read the story of SNCC and the slow, backwater work of the civil

rights movement, and read the writer and farmer Wendell Berry, and see the key importance of nurture and tender mercies, is because I see and read through this small, modest congregation. If I were a Big Steeple pastor I would likely think the Way of God was Big Answers, Big Productions, Big Events, Big Money, and Fast Christians.

I do believe that in our fast-paced world with Big Problems, we are tempted to see the answer to our problems as making changes at the top and hope the changes trickle down to everyone. Part of that is why we care so much about who is elected president. Don't get me wrong, I care too but I believe we need to start on the other end.

I believe that God does not work from the top down. God is a bottom-up kind of God. Instead of putting our time, money, and energy into who is president, perhaps we should be putting more energy into our local life together. We've a local school bond election coming up in two months. This is one of those places we need to tend.

The kingdom of God is from the bottom up. It's called the Incarnation, God becoming the human Jesus and calling disciples like you and me to love and serve and heal and care. Top down means we are not responsible. It means we can be bystanders and spectators. We don't have to be personally involved. But the kingdom of God, the bottom-up way, means that we are not only responsible, we are called. We are called to be involved. The Incarnation means God got involved, personally, relationally. And so are we.

Victoria Barnett, director of ethics and religion at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. says, “A consistent characteristic of those who resisted Nazism or rescued its victims was their acknowledgement of relationship, both to what was happening around them and to the victims” (*Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust*, p. 145). She holds up the example of the French village of Le Chambon of people who got involved personally and relationally sheltering Jews from the Nazis. (By the way – Did you know this same village is now sheltering Muslims?)

Theologian Robert McAfee Brown said, “A ‘moral society’ will be a society of participants rather than spectators” (quoted in *Bystanders*, p. 162). We don’t have to change the world but we do have to show up, participate, and to tend to our children, our schools, our city, and our neighbors.

So remember the quote I’ve given you before from Mother Teresa, “We can do no great things – only small things, with great love.” Each day you are tempted to despair at the enormity of the problems before us, try to do one small thing with great love.

I believe that in some mysterious way we don’t understand, that when we tend to one small thing with great love, God works and empowers beyond our comprehension.

There was a story that circulated at youth camp a few years ago of a little



girl who got up each morning and made herself a sandwich for her school lunch. She put it in a plastic sandwich bag and got in the car and her mother drove her to school. They went the same route every morning. And every morning they came to a red light where over on the sidewalk there was an old, bedraggled, dirty, homeless man sitting. Every morning she looked out the car window at the man and every morning he looked at her.

One morning, almost on a whim, when she made her sandwich, she made a second sandwich and put it in a sandwich bag too. When her mother and her got to the intersection red light, she rolled her window down just a few inches, looked at the man, and stuck the sandwich out the window. Before the light could change the man got up, came to the window and took the sandwich.

The next morning she didn't fix a second sandwich and when she came to the red light she didn't roll down her window but she looked at the man and she could see that he looked sad. So the next day, she fixed a second sandwich and at the red light she again rolled her window down and again the man came and got the sandwich. She did the same the next day and the day after. One day she and her mother drove up to the red light and with the man, were a whole line of homeless people looking at her. Her mother said, "Now what are you going to do? We can't feed everyone."

At school and at home by social media she contacted every one of her friends who went to school the same route she went. And every one of her friends fixed one extra sandwich. When each child got to the same red light, they gave one

sandwich to a person in line. Over time, by way of social media, this little girl got other kids at other schools to do the same and it spread to other cities.

One little girl. One extra sandwich. One small thing with great love. One person at a time. One small church named Austin Heights – tending and caring.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.