

Wise and Innocent

Sunday 10/ 10/2011

Matthew 10: 5-16

On of the best teachers that I ever had was a man named Johnny Tolbert. Johnny didn't have a Ph.D. or a Master's Degree in anything, other than life. Most of his life, Johnny had been a bus driver in Chicago. Johnny didn't teach in a classroom. In fact, he worked in the basement of the Fourth Presbyterian Church on Michigan Avenue in a brand new crisis counseling center called, "The Door." I never had to write a paper for Johnny. He never gave me a grade. In fact, I'm pretty sure he thought I'd written way too many papers already in my life! Johnny was my boss in that counseling center. Given that our clientele could be a little rough and that Johnny was a man of slight build himself, I'm pretty sure Johnny's only consoling thought on the day that we met was, "Well, at least the kid is big!"

A lot of people have written about the idea that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. That's certainly how it worked with Johnny in my life. I was getting toward the end of seminary and was at risk for simply floating into the outer space of abstract ideas. I had worked in various ways with homeless folks in the city already but had grown weary of a model that provided an important service (shelter and food) but didn't seem to address the root causes of the crises in people's lives. I had stood on a corner in Uptown at 4:00 a.m. while walking between shelters and had one threatening person tell me, "We eat hippies like you for breakfast!" (Later, I laughed about that!) I had found myself standing between a guest armed with a folding chair and another guest who was ready to use the cast on his arm as his weapon and though, "How did I get here?" Mostly, I had watched everyone be turned out in the morning and wondered, "Where do they go?"

Working at "The Door" was a chance to be a part of an experiment in trying to transform people's lives. Yes, we had a food

pantry. Yes, we had a clothing closet. Yes, we had access to shelters. However, if you came to us, the question that we were committed to asking was, “How can we help you to really resolve this crisis?” The church had a lot of resources, especially when it came to human resources: city officials and high powered lawyers and employers all were members and had made themselves available to help. It was an exciting time. Lives were changed.

To be honest, my life was changed. I think it was in “The Door” that I went from being a student and budding theologian and general observer in life to beginning to be a pastor. You see, Johnny was more than happy to talk about ideas but when push came to shove he was all about helping people. The call would come from the desk upstairs. Sometimes you could hear the fear in the secretary’s voice: “Um...there’s a man here who says his name is Angel and if you could come talk to him right away that would be great!” (Angel, it would turn out, had all sorts of chronic mental health issues. He was also about 6’9” and loved to sneak into the clothing closet and try on women’s clothing.) Other times, you could hear the secretary’s empathy: “Mark...Daisy’s here.” (Daisy was an elderly homeless woman from the south--a regular visitor.) “She’s not alone though. She has a girl with her who can’t be more than 15.” (It turned out Daisy had recognized that this girl, a runaway from Iowa, wasn’t going to survive long on the streets. Though she was homeless herself, Daisy brought her in!) Every time I walked up the stairs to meet someone, “class” was in session. Every time I finished trying to help, Johnny was waiting to sort things out.

Johnny might have been the first person I knew who, in the language of our text, was “wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove.” He was worldly without being jaded. In addition to being a bus driver, later in his career, Johnny had been a leader in the Teamsters. Trust me...between driving that bus and being a part of that union world, he knew how things worked. He knew that not everyone had good intentions. He knew that sometimes whole

systems were messed up. It was Johnny who figured out that a few of the homeless folks we were helping with boxes of food were turning around and selling those boxes to a Chicago police officer, who then cooked and sold the food in his local restaurant. Yet, I never saw Johnny, in that moment or any other moment of disappointment, seem all that surprised and seem setback from his goals at all. We're here to help. That's not easy to do. Sometimes folks are going to take advantage, despite our best efforts. Sometimes our best efforts are just going to fail. Sometimes, though, we're going to help some people! Let's see if we can't get that done...

Maybe in every profession there is a moment when our best teachers and mentors look those they've been teaching in the eye and say, "Okay...now it's your turn!" The surgeon hands the scalpel to the resident. The teacher hands over the classroom to the student teacher. Tracy and I laughed when we each did our first weddings, "Wow...those people actually think they're married! Fooled them!" Sooner or later, you have to trust what you've learned and act like you know what you're doing, even if you're not all that convinced that you do. Johnny kept sending me up those stairs: "Go find out how you can help!" Usually, just after saying that he would light up another of his unfiltered Camel cigarettes, put his feet up on his desk and say, "I'll be right here when you find out!"

In our text for this morning, the disciples are precisely at this point with Jesus (minus, of course, the unfiltered Camels!). They have listened to him preach. They have seen him heal people. They have had plenty of chances to walk and talk along the way. "The Door" was a very comfortable place to spend time. Johnny had a lot of great stories to tell. However, that moment does come in life (over and over again it turns out) when the message that we receive is pretty simple: "Okay...not it's your turn." Can you

imagine how the disciples' jaws must have dropped as they received their "marching orders!"

Those orders ran something like this... "I have work for you to do. Like every other job, we have to start somewhere, so let's start with your own Jewish brothers and sisters. I want you to let them know that God is in their midst, that the Kingdom of God is among them. Then, I want you to go to work. I want you to 'cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons.' And, oh, by the way, I want you to take next to nothing with you--just the shoes on your feet and the cloak on your back. The people you help will feed you."

Imagine the disciples reactions... "Wow...We can heal the sick and raise the dead and cleanse the lepers and cast out demons! We're powerful guys, eh?" Then, try to guess how long the next truth took to sink in: "Well...if we're going to heal the sick, we have to actually hang out with sick people. If we're going to raise the dead, we have to actually be near a corpse and be surrounded by sad people. If we're going to cleanse lepers then we might have to actually touch one. If we're going to cast out demons, then we have to actually care about people who are mentally ill. Ick! Yuck! All the rules tell us that is precisely what we shouldn't do!" And just a moment or so after that complaint, it must have dawned on them that if the people whom they served were going to feed them then they were about to eat "leper" food.

So...the disciples will be able to do things that they've never done before. Honestly, just about everyone who has ever really thrown themselves into helping someone else will tell those kind of stories, not about raising the dead or healing the lepers but of things just somehow working, for reasons that they can't really explain. God does help us to be helpful. However, things aren't going to feel real secure or comfortable. You're going to spend time with real people with real needs. People with real needs can sometimes be hard to be with and can sometimes do some pretty

desperate things. Share the good news with them that there is a God who cares and that you care, too. Then, do what you can and see what happens.

Jesus really doesn't pull any punches. He tells them ahead of time, "Sometimes, here's what will happen: people will reject you." Certainly, we have to believe that the disciples would have seen this already with Jesus many times. It seems safe to say that the vast majority of people to whom Jesus spoke, to whom Jesus offered the chance to be followers, couldn't be bothered. They were too busy. Things were fine just the way they were. They knew he was going to ask them to do what they didn't want to do and care about people whom they really didn't want to care about. They would just nod and act like they were listening and then get back to business when he was done. Jesus looks his disciples in the eye and says, "People are going to do this to you, too." Some people will listen with deaf ears. Some people will take whatever help you have to offer and then walk away. Here's what I want you to do when that happens: I want you to shake the dust off your sandals and move on. I want you to try again in the next town."

In the end, Jesus tells the disciples to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves." What an interesting image from Jesus himself of what it means to follow Christ. We don't have to be naive about how the world works. In fact, there is value in understanding how systems work and how people work, too. We want our help to be effective. We want to be good stewards of God's gifts. We want to transform lives, not just sustain crises. So we ask questions: "Can you show me the bill you want me to help with? Do you mind if I call the landlord? Let's talk about what it would take to really make this problem go away. I want to really help you." Sometimes, when things don't add up or when a request is just more than we can do we will say, "No." However, as a people of faith, we won't ask the questions that we need to ask or turn down a request that we need to say no to in a way that dismisses or disrespects a person. What

makes us “innocent as doves,” what we strive to protect and maintain, is the sense that every person in need who crosses our path is a child of God, no matter what their struggles might be. The question is not do I care about this person. The question is can I help this person.

It is a really complicated thing to help another person. Sometimes, that person might need the help we can offer and everything works. Sometimes, we might help that person find the right person who can help. Sometimes, we might not be able really help that much at all. However, we hope and pray, that having someone who cared enough to listen might make enough difference in that person’s life for today.

May God make us all “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”