

INAUSPICIOUS BEGINNINGS

Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

It was the best of times, and it was the worst of times. In August 1978, I started a new job/ministry. Seeking ways to incorporate my education of a Master of Education in Student Personnel and Counseling in higher education with my call to ministry, I had accepted a position serving as a Residence Hall Director/Campus minister at Davis and Elkins College in West Virginia. I was so excited to begin this new chapter in my life. Along with 6 student staff, I was in charge of the Women's Center residence hall. The freshmen had arrived early for orientation and whooped it up the night before. Even though I had spent the entire night in the local ER with one of the freshmen who had alcohol poisoning, I was expected to participate in a day long relationship building workshop.

We loaded up campus vans and headed out to Seneca Rocks. One of my fellow campus pastors, Steve, was an experienced rock climber and planned to pass on his skill to all participants of the workshop. Even with my lack of sleep, I was game for this and looked forward to impressing my student staff. A number of students and fellow Residence Hall Directors went before me and practically scampered up the rocks after a few minute's instruction. Steve got me roped in and began directing my 'climb.' Carefully following his directions, I began moving up the face of the rock. Two feet above the wide ledge upon which I had been sitting I panicked...and froze neither able to move up or down!! Those two feet might as well have been two hundred feet! Clinging to the rock I bet it took Steve a good 45+ minutes to 'talk' me down to the safety of the bottom ledge. I was totally humiliated and ashamed with my inauspicious beginning.

The following words from author Chaim Potok would have been perfect for me that day: "All beginnings are hard. I can remember hearing my mother murmur those words while I lay in bed with fever. 'Children are often sick, darling. That's the way it is with children. All beginnings are hard. You'll be all right soon.'"

"I remember bursting into tears one evening because a passage of Bible commentary had proved too difficult for me to understand. I was about nine years old at the time. 'You want to understand everything immediately?' my father said. 'Just like that? You only began to study this commentary last week. All beginnings are hard. You have to work at the job of studying. Go over it again and again.'"

"The man who later guided me in my studies would welcome me warmly into his apartment and, when we sat at his desk, say to me in his gentle voice, 'Be patient, David.' The midrash says, 'All beginnings are hard. You cannot swallow all the world at one time.'"

I think I was prepared to swallow the face of the rock Steve had selected to teach us the basics of rock climbing, and when I froze, I felt like a complete and total failure.

Failure by the world's standards is quite different than God's standards. While I was prepared to throw in the towel, pack my bags and go home with my tail between my legs, God had different plans as I stayed on for the next 2 ½ years. My experience is not that different from anyone else. Many of us excel at developing worst-case scenarios. We often paralyze ourselves by allowing

the chance of failure to pollute our minds. We make decisions based on fear, instead of on faith, and in the process, we sabotage our own best efforts. When have we failed to speak openly about our Christian faith, because we were afraid of being mocked? When have we held back from giving generously to a worthy cause, because we were nervous about our finances? When have we dragged our feet about entering a new relationship, because we were scared of being hurt? When have we turned away from an exciting professional opportunity, because we were anxious about the risks involved in trying something new? (Homiletics Online, 2004)

“Success is not final; Failure is not fatal; It is the courage to carry on that counts.” Often incorrectly attributed to Winston Churchill, this quotation is actually from a Budweiser beer advertising campaign from the 1930s!

The courage to carry on is what counts. Imagine you are part of the group of 70 (2) Jesus sends out in the Gospel of St. Luke, our text for this morning? If you are the kind of person who needs every “i” dotted and “t” crossed; a person who has endless detailed lists when tackling a task determined to leave nothing to chance, and therefore possible failure in your mind, then Jesus’ instructions to you might be a little more than unsettling. If you note, in verse 3, Jesus gives the 70 very specific instructions: *Go! Be warned, though, that I’m sending you out as lambs among wolves. Carry no wallet, no bag, and no sandals.* And immediately, the planners begin to hyperventilate: What? How long are we going to be away? What and how shall we eat? How will we be able to afford a place to rest and sleep at night... Jesus’ instructions has all the markings for the sending of the 70 to be an inauspicious beginning. But that does not happen does it?

Having stated his initial guidelines for their mission, Jesus then provided more specific directives for his disciples. When they entered a house, they were to bless that house and say, “Peace to this house!” If anyone opened his or her door (i.e., “shares in peace”), that act was to be seen as a sign that the disciples’ “peace [would] rest on that person”. And whenever anyone welcomed them, the disciples were to receive whatever peace offerings were graciously presented to them. They were to respect their hosts and “remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide...”. In addition, they were to stay in that house rather than move about, even if better accommodations arose, because such behavior would be off-putting, offensive and extremely rude. (Homiletics Online, 2019)

Jesus’ disciples were to display a generous and considerate disposition not only with individual homeowners but also with all people in any town that received them. He told his disciples, “Eat whatever is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you. And if they happened to enter a town that was unwilling to receive them – as occurred in Samaria – they were not to “command fire to come down from heaven”. Instead, Jesus commanded them to “go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near’”. The disciples were to announce – both with a symbolic gesture and words – that even though that town had rebuffed them and thus hindered them from showing any acts of mercy (i.e., receiving and being received; curing the sick), God’s kingdom had nonetheless “come near.”

When the 70 returned, they were filled “with joy.” Even though only a relatively small number of laborers had been sent out, they had gathered a great harvest because “the Lord of the harvest” had heard and answered Jesus’ request. Despite being “lambs,” his disciples hadn’t been devoured. Because they were faithful and had followed the Lord’s instructions, they cured many villagers and “even the demons” submitted to them.

Indeed, the undertaking was so triumphant that Jesus employed another striking metaphor to describe what had happened: “See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy”. Lacking proper equipment and supplies, Jesus’ disciples had been sustained by the generosity of their hosts, proclaimed good news about God’s kingdom wherever they went and cured the sick. “Nothing” had “hurt” or hindered them. Despite appearances, the disciples had received both the physical and spiritual provisions they needed so they could bring the kingdom of God near where Jesus had “intended to go.” (Homiletics Online, 2019).

The mission of the 70 (2) was completely successful. Why? Because they were faithful in following Jesus’ instructions. It was also successful because they learned that they were able to follow Jesus’ instructions because of the power of the Triune God and not on their own steam. All their accomplishments were ultimately insignificant, especially given the fact that they were merely the result of God’s gracious provision. Sadly, today, the church universal seems to have lost this kind of faith. When taking on a new task, we research down to the tiniest detail, and although this is not a bad thing, but rather shows good stewardship of the church’s finances – such action can squelch the power of the Holy Spirit, and cause us to become a little conceited. Further it can weaken our faith and trust in God.

I believe this is the message of today’s Gospel lesson. I would invite and encourage all of you, however, to be willing to take risks where God’s ministry in Marquis is concerned. Trust me...if the ministry is ordained by God, God WILL make a way. I have shared this in every one of my appointments.

In closing, a story of the truly inauspicious beginning of one of God’s greatest evangelists:

In 1945, shortly after the end of the Second World War, a young associate pastor named Cliff and his fiancée, Billie, arranged to get married, despite the fact that they had very little money. They managed to scrape together enough funds for a simple wedding and two train tickets to a city where Cliff had been asked to hold a revival with a friend.

Arriving at the city, the newlyweds got off the train and took a cab to their hotel, only to learn that the hotel had been taken over by the military as a rehabilitation center. They were stranded in an unfamiliar city with only a few dollars in their pockets. There was little they could do, so they hitched a ride on the nearby highway. The man who gave them their ride asked the young couple, "Where would you like to be dropped off?" Cliff's answer was somewhat confusing, "We don't know," and he proceeded to explain their situation. The man was sympathetic and offered a suggestion. A few miles down the road was a grocery store owned by a woman whom he knew. He told them that she had a couple of empty rooms upstairs and might be willing to

allow them to stay there inexpensively. Cliff realized that this was not the time to be choosy, so he asked the woman for a room. She gave it to them for \$5, and they were thrilled.

The following day, Cliff practiced his trombone while his beloved played the piano to the delight of the woman who owned the home. By the music they played, the woman soon realized that this young couple were Christians and invited them to spend the remainder of their honeymoon in her house.

By the end of the first week, they had become great friends. The woman mentioned that a young evangelist was speaking at a youth rally nearby and invited them to attend. Upon arriving, they discovered that the regular song leader was sick, so Cliff was asked to take charge of the music for the service. The evangelist turned out to be the young Billy Graham, and the groom was Cliff Barrows. They met that evening for the first time and a lifetime partnership was formed. And from the beginnings of that evening, Cliff and Billie Barrows became members of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and have been used by the Lord in thousands of crusades around the world. All of this began from what could have been a most inauspicious beginning!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!!