



Kevin Wright
Luke 9:1-6
August 10, 2008

Jesus wants his disciples to get their hands dirty. “Hey guys,” Jesus says, “Come here a second, I want to talk with you about something.” And after a few words of instruction, Jesus sends his 12 disciples out into the world to proclaim the kingdom of God. But just as Peter, James and John begin packing their suitcases for this extended business trip, Jesus says, “Hold on a second fellas, one more thing, take nothing for the journey except the shirt on your backs. Put back your staff, your bag, your food, your wallets, your extra change of clothes, your iPod, your cell phone, your traveler’s checks...” You get the picture. Can you imagine the disciples’ reaction? “But Jesus, what will we do without these things? Can’t we at least take an extra pair of underwear?” But Jesus is firm in his resolve. “In fact,” Jesus begins as his disciples probably wince at what will come next, “Stay wherever you are welcome and if you can’t find a hospitable household, move on until you do.”

By now the disciples might be thinking, “This is ridiculous. I can’t believe this guy. He expects us to go out and do all of these things, yet he strips us of our expense accounts and won’t even break down for us to get a cheap hotel.” And if the disciples are not thinking this, we are. There’s something about this story that hits a nerve in all of us. Most of us live fairly comfortable lives, aided by a host of things that make our lives rather pleasant. We have cars to get us from point A to point B, credit cards, Blackberries and retirement plans. But perhaps it’s not so much what these things add to our lives that make us so comfortable, but rather what these things somehow manage to keep out. Dependency.

I just saw a few of you shudder when I mentioned that word. Dependency. There, some of you did it again. We are not a people who take pride in being dependent upon others. We’re a go-getting, try not to be a burden on others, I can handle this myself thank-you-very-much type of people. After all, who wants to have to depend on others, because that would be a sign of weakness, of need, of letting the world know that I don’t quite have my life together as much as I’d like you to believe. When we are dependent on others, we find ourselves in an extremely vulnerable position where our lives are exposed on a level we’d rather not experience. The only time we like dependents is when we can claim them on our taxes.

Right after I graduated from seminary, I found myself with a lot of time on my hands. I can assure you this is no longer the case. All of a sudden, I experienced this new sensation, I think it’s called “free time,” and I loved it. So I began using that free time to get reacquainted with an old friend of mine – Television. It didn’t matter what was on, all that mattered was that I now had time to sit on my couch and watch TV. And in my lack of discretion I found myself watching a show on how to build bird feeders. And for 10 whole minutes, I watched a very exuberant bird expert, or ornithologist for those of you who care, passionately warn viewers not to build a bird feeder so elaborate that it would cause the birds to develop a sense of dependency. And it occurred to me that the only thing sadder than me actually watching that television show was the way in which our fear of dependency extended even to birds and bird feeders.

But while bird experts and ourselves might fear dependency, Jesus apparently has no problem with it. Rather, he sets his disciples up such that the only thing they have is each other and the people they will encounter. Jesus has stacked the deck in such a way that the disciples have no choice but to open their lives to others, and hope for the same in return. It's as if Jesus wants us to know that if we're going to succeed in this proclaiming-the-kingdom business, we're not going to be able to do this on our own. Dare I say it, we're going to need each other. This is what Paul was getting at when wrote in 1 Corinthians 12 that although we are many parts, we still form one body. Just as the foot can't tell the eye to take a hike and the hand can't exile the ear, so we, too, as the body of Christ cannot tell each other that we don't need you. We are, whether we like it or not, dependent upon each other. And it is this dependency, Jesus shows his disciples, that is a prerequisite for the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. For what better way to announce a Kingdom where everyone serves each other than by placing yourself in a position to serve and be served?

But by now, the realist comes forward. "Come on, Kevin," you paint this lovely picture of a community where everyone serves each other and holds hands and sings "Kum-by-yah," but that isn't reality! I mean, come on, sure these people dress up nice, but have you seen them once they walk out those doors? Any person who thinks that we're this perfect place of sunshine, lollypops, and rainbows, has got to be kidding himself. And I would agree with you. Not only is such a notion false, it is downright dangerous. The truth is that each and every one of us has at one time or another brought to this room our own shortcomings, fears, quirks and sins. But such a realization, rather than being destructive, actually saves our community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian, put it this way, "Every human dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community self becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial." To love the dream of community rather than the actual community, is as Bonhoeffer put it, a hindrance to the genuine community itself. I can preach all day about how Jesus wants us to depend on each other, but the truth is, sometimes we let each other down because, surprise surprise, we're not perfect. Not every village Jesus' disciples visited welcomed them with open arms or even civil ones. Sometimes people mess up. And that's exactly why Jesus calls us to come together and continue to depend on each other.

I had a professor in college who told me that everything I needed to know about Christian community I would learn from a washing machine. And you know what, I found out that he was absolutely right. About a year ago, I decided that it was time to buy my very first washing machine. Apparently smelling your clothes to see if they're still clean is no replacement for actually washing them. And as I began scouring garage sales and Craigslist for a washing machine, I soon discovered that not all washing machines are created equal. You see, some washing machines are designed so that you put the clothes in through a door that opens at the top and others are built so that you put your clothes in through a door on the side. The top loading washing machines have this thing called an agitator, it's that white pole that spins around pummeling your blue jeans this way and that. And I suppose some people think that's how God should clean up our Christian community here, use his power to beat the sin out of us. But the side-loading washing machines work differently. There's no agitator that beats the clothes until they surrender their spaghetti stains. Instead, the machine spins the clothes around so that they clump together and as they come into contact with each other, they rub out each other's stains. It's the contact that makes the clothes come clean. This is God's washing machine of choice.

Jesus sending his disciples out was just as much for their own good as it was for the good of the people they encountered. It's no secret that the disciples had their issues. James and John wrestled with sibling rivalry. Peter's impulsiveness proved dangerous. Judas had no problem helping himself to the ministry's bank account. But rather than beating his disciples over the head until they shaped up, Jesus sent them out to proclaim the Kingdom, and in the very process of that proclamation began bringing healing and restoration to their lives. Puffed up with pride, Peter? Try asking that child over there if you can share his sandwich. Think you're really going places, Thomas? Let's see how far you get without a wallet. Leaning more on that stick than you are on God, John? Well, hand it over before you leave. If you find yourself having to lean on others, good, because the community of dependency is the community of salvation.

In the valley of Galati, a city in Romania, I found myself surrounded by devastating poverty. Broken glass littered the streets, and the residents of the valley had little more than cement bricks stacked on top of each other to protect them from the cold. I was over in Romania visiting two of my best friends who work for an organization called Word Made Flesh. This ministry's mission is to serve Jesus among the poorest of the poor, and by the looks of the valley, they were more than living up to their ambition. The children were playing some variation of basketball and one boy in particular, named Andrei, tried his best to dribble the ball in one hand while holding an orange in another. My friends had told me that Andrei came from a very broken family. Although he was just 9 years old, he would spend much of the day begging for money with his little brothers, trying to scrape enough together to get a bite to eat. I got up from where I was sitting and walked over to Andrei, pointed at his orange and tried to congratulate his efforts at playing one-handed basketball. Andrei misunderstood me, however, looked at his orange, broke off a piece, and in one of the most profound moments of beneficence I have ever witnessed, offered it to me. The hungry boy, who didn't know if there would be food for him when he got home, offered me part of his lunch. I have never had a better teacher on how to be generous than Andrei. I need Andrei in my life because through my friendship with him, God heals the parts of me that are a slave to scarcity, and teaches me to be generous in spite of my selfish impulses to be just the opposite.

Friends, we need each other precisely because it is through sharing a common life with one another that God brings hope and healing to our lives. I'm glad that we have sung songs today from around the world, because it is a reminder to us that when we go out to proclaim the Kingdom through mission trips, or even go just across town to volunteer at CHAMP, join together to build a Habitat house or gather here in worship, we come into contact with each other and, as a result, experience God's healing through our common life together. As we befriend one other and serve alongside of each other, we find ourselves in a position where God might teach us patience, loyalty, kindness and friendship. And as we encounter the people to whom we proclaim this good news of God's Kingdom, we are challenged to grow in understanding, love and faith. Our contact with each other does more than just wear off a few rough edges. It is the very means by which God heals our lives. But if we close ourselves off, stop coming to worship, refuse to open our lives up to others, and tell ourselves the lie that we can do it on our own, we gain none of this. For such can only come about through the means which God has provided – that is, each other.

So maybe it's not that Jesus wants his disciples to get their hands dirty. Maybe it's just that he wants them to get their entire lives clean.