

Lessons from Shenandoah: “Step Across” - Part II (Outreach)

Message for North East United Methodist Church

September 3, 2017

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Last Sunday, I shared with you that while hiking my boys and I, and our friends...



...we often come across streams and chasms in the rocks that we have to jump over...



...that we have to “STEP ACROSS”.



One of the lessons I have gleaned from Shenandoah and these moments...



...is the need to “STEP ACROSS” the chasms that exist in our lives...

These moments in the mountains remind me that Christ calls us to “STEP ACROSS” the chasms created by broken relationships. We spoke of such chasms last week and the need and call for forgiveness.

Secondly, these moments in the mountains remind me that Christ calls us to **Step Across The Chasms Between Us And Those Who Are Different**

Romans 15:7 (NIV), “*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*”

I remember seeing a great example of this...a few years back, pitcher Cliff Lee dominated the Rays, pitching 9 innings with 11 strikeouts and the Texas Rangers had its first postseason series victory ever. It was the first time that a MLB playoff series ended with the road team winning every game. But even more special was the way the team celebrated the big win: with ginger ale.



The Rangers passed on the usual champagne in honor of MVP candidate Josh Hamilton, who is a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. Hamilton was quoted, “*It meant a lot,*” he said. “*It just says a lot about my teammates, them understanding the sensitivity of my situation.*”

Hamilton’s teammates were willing to sacrifice their tradition, “STEP ACROSS” the chasm, out of love for him.

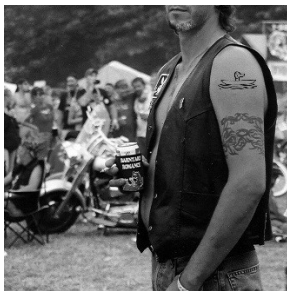
But sometimes it gets harder when it is a neighbor...someone of a different color, faith, lifestyle...a stranger...someone who acts different, speaks different...the chasm seems too wide to cross...so we turn back to our churches and the people we know so we can be comfortable...

Reggie McNeal, in his book, *Missional Renaissance*, writes, “*Because God is on mission, the people of God are too. God is a sending God. Just as he sent his Son and his Holy Spirit to the world, he is sending his people into the world.*”

We are told in Matthew 22: 37-40 (NIV) - ***Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*”**

McNeal writes, “***... followers of Jesus take seriously Jesus’ claim that loving one’s neighbor ranks right up there with loving God.*”**

I am reminded of a story I heard at a Christian concert years back. The speaker talked about how one day he went into the local motorcycle shop in order to get his bike fixed. The shop was filled with what he termed “colorful characters.”



Leather jackets, pierced bodies, and tattoos. These characters started talking to him about things they had done, experiences that they had. Watson says his eyes were opened to quite a few things. But he went on to talk about how he couldn’t wait to get to heaven and see many of these same bikers, piercings and tattoos a many, walking around. And he spoke of the straight-laced church member who will arrive and stand there...wide-eyed...mouth gaping...wondering, “*Oh my...oh my...how did they get here.*”

What would be his response to such a question...“*They got here the same way you did...*”

In the book of Revelation, it is written, “***I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”***”

McNeal explains, “*In a kingdom-oriented worldview, the target of God’s redemptive love is the world, not the church (“For God so loved the world,” Jesus said; NOT “for God so loved the church”). . . as the church engages the world, it finds Jesus, whose home is in the streets or wherever he has to go to connect with the people he is pursuing, meaning everybody. In a church-centric world, our responsibility is to bring people out of the streets into the church. A kingdom-oriented approach seeks to leverage the gospel into people’s lives right where they live, work, and play. The church is wherever followers of Jesus are. People don’t go to church; they are the church. They don’t bring people to church; they bring the church to people.*”

This is certainly what Paul did...Paul did not bring people to church; he brought the church to the people...

Acts 20: 19-24 - Paul sends a message to the Christians in Ephesus, ***“I have done the Lord’s work humbly – yes, and with tears. I have endured the trials that came to me from the plots of the Jews. Yet I never shrank from telling you the truth, either publicly or in your homes. I have had one message for Jews and Gentiles alike – the necessity of turning from sin and turning to God, and of faith in our Lord Jesus. And now I am going to Jerusalem, drawn there irresistibly by the Holy Spirit, not know what awaits me, except that the Holy Spirit has told me in city after city that jail and suffering lay ahead. But my life is worth nothing unless I use it for doing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus – the work of telling others the Good News about God’s wonderful kindness and love.”***

Paul always kept his mission in front of him...Paul understood that his life was not his own... that God had created him for a purpose, for a mission...that he had the greatest news to offer the world...news of salvation, of hope, of forgiveness, of eternal life...for this Paul was willing to press on in the midst of persecution, beatings, heartache, loss, and threat of death...He was willing to “STEP ACROSS” whatever chasm lay in his path to help someone else know about God’s love...

In Acts 21, several people, with the gift of prophecy, let Paul know that if he goes to Jerusalem, he will be bound and turned over to the Romans. Paul’s friends and fellow Christians try to convince him not to go to Jerusalem; yet, Paul is ready to follow the Lord’s Will no matter what the consequences. When the other Christians see Paul’s faith and resolve, they too respond, “*The will of the Lord be done.*” Paul understood that he was called to “STEP ACROSS”...there were others he needed to tell about Jesus...others he needed to love in the name of Jesus...this was the path God wanted him to take in order to reach Rome with the message of the Gospel...

In Acts 22, Paul is arrested...but throughout the last six chapters of Acts, Paul uses every opportunity to “STEP ACROSS,” to build relationships with his jailers, with kings, with Roman officials, with soldiers...he even takes time to speak to the mobs about Christ...the very mobs that call for his death...

Each of us... this church...has one mission...to make disciples of Jesus Christ...to tell people, to share with others, to touch lives with the love of Jesus...Each of us have been given unique gifts, passions, skills to use in this mission...each of us have been placed in different neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, areas where people have been placed in our lives to connect with....where we can “STEP ACROSS” the chasms that exist, build relationships, and share the love of God...

The question becomes will you accept...will you accept the mission? Will you “STEP ACROSS” when the opportunity is placed in front of you? And there are countless opportunities...

As I look back over my life the times I have often felt closest to God when I have served others...when I have accepted this mission to “STEP ACROSS”...whether it was traveling to Peru or Kentucky God appeared in a mighty way in the midst of us denying ourselves in order to reach others for Him...whether it was stopping, helping, and praying with a beggar on the streets of Chicago or Washington, DC, God appeared in a mighty way when I stepped out of my comfort zone, across the walls created by fear and prejudice, and allowed my life to touch a life very different from my own...

And there are times I have missed God...times I was focused on myself, my own issues...times I was afraid to reach out to the person asking for help who looked very different from the people I often associate with...times I judged the other person unworthy of my attention...I am sure you, too, can recall such moments...

In the future, when you and I realize we have missed an opportunity...when we realize we have failed in our mission to love our neighbor...Let us remember that, like Paul, we must “*press on toward the goal*”...get back up...confess our shortfall, and ask God for the faith and strength to not fail to “STEP ACROSS” the next time the opportunity to love another presents itself...

Will you accept the mission? Will you “STEP ACROSS” when the opportunity is placed in front of you? The opportunity to help oversee and work with volunteers to have the Emergency Rotating Shelter here at North East UMC this winter, reaching those who are without a home... the opportunity to travel to Kentucky next summer with the Mission Team...the opportunity to give, to talk to, the person at the intersection holding a sign, “Please Help”...the opportunity to reach out to the stranger who comes into church on Sunday morning...to connect with that co-worker and share with them the story of a God who loves them so much...Will you “STEP ACROSS” the next time the opportunity arises, fulfilling Christ’s command to love your neighbor as you love yourself?

A final story...a mother of three (ages 14, 12, 3) had recently completed her college degree. The last class she had to take was Sociology. Her last project of the term was called "Smile." The class was asked to go out and smile at three people and document their reactions.

She records her experience, *"I am a very friendly person and always smile at everyone and say hello anyway, so, I thought, this project would be a piece of cake, literally. Soon after we were assigned the project, my husband, youngest son, and I went out to McDonald's one crisp March morning. It was just our way of sharing special playtime with our son. We were standing in line, waiting to be served, when all of a sudden everyone around us began to back away, and then even my husband did.*

As I turned around I smelled a horrible "dirty body" smell, and there standing behind me were two poor homeless men. As I looked down at the short gentleman, close to me, he was "smiling". His beautiful sky blue eyes were full of God's Light as he searched for acceptance. He said, "Good day" as he counted the few coins he had been clutching. The second man fumbled with his hands as he stood behind his friend. I realized the second man was mentally deficient and the blue-eyed gentleman was his salvation.

I held my tears as I stood there with them. The young lady at the counter asked him what they wanted. He said, "Coffee is all Miss" because that was all they could afford. (If they wanted to sit in the restaurant and warm up, they had to buy something. He just wanted to be warm). Then I really felt it - the compulsion was so great I almost reached out and embraced the little man with the blue eyes. That is when I noticed all eyes in the restaurant were set on me, judging my every action. I smiled and asked the young lady behind the counter to give me two more breakfast meals on a separate tray. I then walked around the corner to the table that the men had chosen as a resting spot. I put the tray on the table and laid my hand on the blue-eyed gentleman's cold hand.

He looked up at me, with tears in his eyes, and said, "Thank you." I leaned over, began to pat his hand and said, "I did not do this for you. God is here working through me to give you hope.""

Christ showed us what the power of love was about when He went to the cross,



...and then He tells us that we're to love other people in our lives like that. We have never locked eyes on anyone whom God did not love...anyone whom God did not yearn for...anyone whom God did not want to come into a relationship with Him...

1 John 4:7 - *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.*

...loving others, forgiving others, reaching out to others, Smedes writes, “*comes naturally to anyone who has felt the breath of [God’s] forgiving love on her own heart.*”

”STEP ACROSS”. Isn’t this exactly what Christ did...stepping across the chasm, the gulf, that existed between us and God...building a bridge from one nail scarred hand to the other for us to cross and have a relationship with our Heavenly Father...



May we reach out to those who need to feel acceptance, who need to experience the love of Jesus Christ...May we show God’s love to those who look different, live different, speak different, think different. At times this will be difficult...way out of our comfort zone...the chasm may seem too wide...and only with God’s strength, only with faith, will we be able to “STEP ACROSS”...but let us start somewhere...today...

Start with the stranger who comes into church on Sunday morning...do all you can to make them feel welcomed...then move to your neighborhoods, your workplaces...who can you reach out to, start a conversation with, take to lunch...then your community...how can you reach out to those less fortunate...how might you not simply tell them but show them the love of God...

Step up the mountain and allow God to fill you with His Spirit, His strength...and then “STEP ACROSS” the chasms that exist between you and others...filling those chasms with Christ’s love and grace...