

Together: A transforming discipleship movement

Luke 10: 25-37

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, love your neighbour as yourself." "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "the one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Introduction

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most well-known parables of Jesus in the Bible. It has been explained, preached on and taught on many-a-time. But when Jesus told it, his hearers were hearing it for the first time. They had not read any commentaries on it. They had not listened to any sermons preached on it before. They had not read any articles published on it. They were hearing it for the first time. At one point, Jesus was teaching on the parable of the sower and the disciples asked him, "*Why do you speak to people in parables?*" (Mt. 13: 10). It is as if they had expected Jesus to speak in simple language that would be easily understood. Even the disciple of today still wonders why the use of parables. Did Jesus speak in parables in order to confuse his hearers about the kingdom? Did he speak in parables in order to "hide" the kingdom from the "outsiders"? Response to these questions is critical because in each parable "*there are layers of meaning beyond the obvious point for those who are prepared to think. The parables sorted out those who came simply to see miracles and be entertained, from serious followers who really wanted to understand Jesus' teaching*"¹. As Cabal puts it², Jesus spoke in parables in order to "*distinguish between 'anyone who has ears to hear' and those who did not*".

Those with "ears to hear" were those who had responsive hearts. They were those who were ready to receive the kingdom into their hearts and lives. They were those who were ready to participate in the kingdom as it was constantly revealed to them. As a result, Jesus told some stories to the crowds but kept the explanation for his disciples – the ones who had ears to hear. He did this because "*he knew that his parables would have opposite effects on those ready to listen and those not ready*"³ (cf.⁴).

Dake⁵ concurs with the above assertions, and further cites seven reasons for Jesus' use of parables in teaching. Firstly, parables reveal the truth in a form intended to create more interest (as in Mt. 13: 10-11, 16). Secondly, they make known new truths to interested hearers (as in Mt. 13: 11-12, 16-17). Thirdly, they make known mysteries by comparison with things already known (as in Mt. 13: 11).

¹ Alexander P. & D. (eds.), 1999, *Handbook to the Bible*, Oxford: Lion Publishing (Page 562).

² Cabal T. (ed.), 2007, *The Apologetic Study Bible*, Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers (Page 1473).

³ Cabal T. (ed.), 2007, *The Apologetic Study Bible*, Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers (Page 1473).

⁴ Alexander P. & D. (eds.), 1999, *Handbook to the Bible*, Oxford: Lion Publishing (Page 562).

⁵ Dake F.J., 2001, *Dake's Annotated Reference Bible – the Holy Bible*, Georgia: Dake Publishing Inc (Page 23 NT)

Fourthly, they conceal truth from disinterested hearers and rebels at heart (as in Mt. 13: 11-15). Fifthly, they add truth to those who love it and want more of it (as in Mt. 13: 12). Sixthly, they take truth away from those who hate it and do not want it (as in Mt. 13: 12). Seventhly, they fulfil prophecy (as in Mt. 13: 14-17, 35). To this end, a parable may be defined as “a story that is or may be true and is used generally to teach some moral or religious truth”⁶.

Armellini sums up the above discourse in one sentence: Jesus spoke in parables as an attempt to break through his contemporaries’ unbelief⁷. The parable forced people to seek out the hidden message, to think and reflect on it. It invited people to examine themselves and thus had the potential of leading them to conversion. Having explained the reasons for Jesus’ use of parables, we now turn our focus to the parable in question.

A Transforming discipleship movement

The Presiding Bishop’s call is for the Methodist people to be a transforming discipleship movement. In my mind a discipleship movement is a movement of keen learners, keen students, keen apprentices or pupils who want to learn everything there is to learn about life from their master. A discipleship movement is a movement of people that are sitting at the feet of the master absorbing and taking in everything that the master says is worth taking in, in order for them to be like the master one day. A discipleship movement is a movement of people that drinks from the same well in which the master drinks so that the cooling waters from which the master draws refreshment refreshes them as well. They walk closely behind the master, treading carefully on the path trodden by him, selectively avoiding the points he avoids along the way, allowing him to pace their steps equally and to guide them along the way.

Luke tells us of a budding discipleship movement of the first century whose master seems to be turning around the tables by ushering in an unusual, even unacceptable way of life. Quoting Nolan, Vusi Vilakati⁸ suggests that this is how Jesus turned the world of his time upside down: “*His life, his message, and his spirituality were revolutionary. He did not propose a number of improvements to the religious beliefs and practices of his time – like patching up an old garment ... he took the values of his time and turned them on their heads ... he was busy with a social revolution...*” (Nolan in Vilakati, 2008: 52). What was the response of his contemporaries to his social revolution? Some decided that there was merit in what he was doing and therefore decided to follow him. Others regarded him as a heretic and a blasphemer of note and therefore rejected him to the point of murdering him. Within the group of those that rejected him were some, whose curiosity and obsession with being right compelled them to come to him. They posed difficult questions that sought to authenticate or write off his ministry. One such question is found in the passage we have just read.

Jesus is the new sheriff in town [so to speak], whose revolutionary-table-turning ministry is characterized by a couple of actions. I began appreciating these actions in my nursing career many years ago. And these actions, if used effectively, have a significantly transformational consequence. These actions are the five senses that God has given to each human being. He **sees**; he **listens**; he **touches**; he **tastes**; he **smells**. These are the five actions that characterize the ministry of Jesus as he traverses the dusty Palestinian territory. Through creative employment of all of his God-given senses, nothing escapes his attention. I will put it to you therefore, that if discipleship is learning from the master how to live, then those who follow Jesus must learn how to use their five senses as well in order to stay in touch with the very world they are called to heal and transform. And so I want to propose that a transforming discipleship movement is a movement that engages all the five senses in order to bring

⁶ Buttrick G.A. (ed.), 1952, *The Interpreter’s Bible Vol. VIII*, Nashville: Abingdon Press (Page 166).

⁷ Armellini F., 1994, *Celebrating the Word – Year A*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa (Page 214).

⁸ Vilakati V., 2008, *Towards metaphors of healing and transformation*. In D. Forster & W. Bentley, *What are we thinking? – Reflections on Church and Society from Southern African Methodists*, (pp. 47-69), Salt River: Methodist Publishing House.

about a difference in the world. Let us now examine the use of these senses in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

1. A Transforming discipleship movement sees clearly

A transforming discipleship movement has to have a visual acuity of 20/20. Visual acuity is defined as acuteness or clearness of vision. When you go to an optometrist they make you sit at a particular distance in a darkened room and ask you to read certain symbols and signs from their wall using one eye at a time. They are testing your visual acuity. A less than perfect vision in a Christian is detrimental to the execution of the mandate of transforming the world. How can you change that which you cannot see? How can you improve that which you are blind to?

In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus is asking those who would follow him to open their eyes. Our calling is to see that the kingdom of God is not about us and what we can gain out of it. Rather, it is about us lending a helping hand to the one in a position of less privilege than ourselves. Our calling is to see that the kingdom of God is not about our racial classification and its resultant benefits or disadvantages; it is about acknowledging that all people are made in God's image irrespective of their skin colour, language, ethnicity and the like. We are invited to see that our calling is not to concern ourselves with matters pertaining to those who are like us only; our calling is to concern ourselves with matters pertaining to what affects all of God's people, irrespective of whether they are Jews or Samaritans. A discipleship movement whose visual acuity is skewed, one way or another, cannot transform the world. Only a discipleship movement that sees clearly; only a discipleship movement that does not pass by on the other side, as the priest and the Levite did when they saw the injured man; only a discipleship movement that does not turn a blind eye to the hurts and pains of the world will transform the world.

It is possible to look without actually seeing what you're looking at. It is possible to pass a glance at something without actually registering in your mind what you just glanced at. Jesus is not calling us to look at things in the world; he is calling us to see them. Looking is turning one's eye to a certain object, while seeing is the perception of the object that is being looked at. A transforming discipleship movement is not just a movement of those who look, but a movement of those who, after looking, perceive and then act on what they have seen. The priest and the Levite both looked at the injured man but they did not perceive that lying on the roadside was not just a body but a human being created in the likeness of God. They looked but they did not see the human being behind what they saw. Seeing calls us not to glance over what we are looking at but to intentionally pay focus to the minor details that encompass the situation we are looking at.

In his book, "Compassionate caring"⁹, Trevor Hudson writes very strongly about the need for followers of Jesus to have eyes that see. He states that Jesus does not only heal people of physical blindness, but also invites them to evaluate the quality of their vision. Jesus believes strongly that the way we see others determines our behaviour towards them. Using the parable of the last Judgment in Matthew 25, where the judge separates the sheep from the goats, Hudson says,

Those on the right obviously had learned to utilize all their capacities of sight – the eyes of the body, of the mind, of the heart. And because of their complete sight, those people had been moved to respond to the sick, the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned, the outcast. They had seen beneath the surface appearances to the Ultimate dimensions – where all persons are in God and God is in all persons.

After saying this, Hudson invites his readers to reflect upon the health of their current eyesight. He asks the following questions:

- *Is my seeing limited to the other person's colour, class or culture?*

⁹ Hudson T, 1999, *Compassionate caring*, Guildford: Eagle Publishers (pp. 45- 48).

- *Do I focus upon outward appearances in my dealings with people?*
- *Do I see people primarily as groups?*
- *Do I view others using my first impressions, rather than hearing them out?*
- *Do I look at possessions as being more important than persons?*

Should there be an affirmative answer to any of these questions, Hudson suggests that we should pray this prayer, “*Lord Jesus, please help me to see each person whom I see today as someone of infinite value and immense worth.*” So, Presiding Bishop Sir, I take it to mean that you are calling the Methodist people in this Connexion to see clearly that which Jesus calls us to see and to act appropriately in addressing it in order for healing and transformation take place. On the 11th of September 2014, Philosophy Museum tweeted, “*It’s not what you look at that matters; it’s what you see*¹⁰.” A discipleship movement that only looks at the challenges confronting the world today and does not possess the intuitive perception that will spur it on to action will never heal and transform the world.

2. A Transforming discipleship movement listens carefully

The story of the Good Samaritan is an invitation by Jesus to those who would follow him to listen carefully to the groans and moans that characterize the existence of many in the world today. At one point in my life I was involved in the training of paramedics who respond to motor vehicle accidents on the road. The first thing we taught paramedics as they get to a scene of an accident is not only to listen to those who scream loudly, but to listen as well to those who groan silently. If there are two people in an accident scene, one is wailing and another is quieter, paramedics know that they must first attend to the quiet one. An attentive listening discipleship movement cannot allow itself to be distracted by the noisemakers; they have to carefully listen to those whose voices aren’t audible anymore, either because they are drowned by the noise or because they are not able to project their voices loudly, because they are the ones who need help the most. It is the eleventh point in the rules of a helper that clarifies this imperative for me: “*You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always not only to those who want you but to those who want you most*¹¹.” At the risk of sounding judgmental against the priest and the Levite, I put it to you that they missed a unique opportunity to transform the world by concerning themselves with those who wanted them and ignoring the one who needed them the most. As a result, they did not bring about any transformation. They just went with the flow. Their refusal to flow against the tide was a refusal to listen to the cries of those who needed them the most.

Listening is a skill that demands quietness on the part of the listener. A noisy and rowdy discipleship movement will not hear the moans and groans of the world and therefore, will not be able to respond appropriately. It takes a particular character of a disciple to listen to others, even if they do not agree with you. It takes a particular level of humility for a disciple to listen even to the voices that may not be appetizing to listen to. It takes an untold amount of discipline and patience to engage oneself in the act of listening. Listening is not inactivity as some may be tempted to think. Active listening engages all our capacities and demands that we not only consider the spoken word but also the unspoken in the body language and gestures of the one we are listening to. The call to be a transforming discipleship movement is a call to listen.

Through the exercise of listening, Emmanuel Ngara¹² says that we will be able to hear the challenges of our time. He asserts that while many would cite HIV/AIDS, fight against crime, dictatorship and oppression, global warming and the threat to the environment, global economic downturn as challenges of our time, the most important issue confronting us in the 21st century is the lack of leadership. We

¹⁰ Philosophy Museum, 11/09/2014. Tweeter.

¹¹ MCSA, 2007, *The Methodist church of Southern Africa – Laws and Discipline*, 11th Edition, Woodstock: Salty Print (Page 191).

¹² Ngara E., 2009, *Key challenges of our time*. In L. Kretzschmar, W. Bentley, & A. van Niekerk (eds.), *What is a good life? – An introduction to Christian ethics in 21st century Africa*, (pp. ix-xiii), Kempton Park: AcadSA Publishing.

need to hear the cry of our communities and nations for leaders of integrity, courage and honesty. Families are deficient of leadership; society is deficient of leadership; the church is deficient of leadership; nations are deficient of leadership. We live in a society that has glamourized mediocrity. Our society that rewards mediocre leaders with more responsibility and authority is now suffering the consequences. While it may be comforting for us to point fingers at society, what about the church? Just look at the breed of those we have placed in positions of leadership within the church. Isn't it time that the church models for the world how to lead? According to Ngara, John van Maurik *"has not only asserted that leadership is the most important issue in the world today, he has gone on to suggest that the welfare of future generations will at least, in part, depend on the quality of leadership in our time."* So frightening is the challenge of leadership deficit that, *"crisis succeeds crisis, yet our leaders come up with few solutions, and the prognosis is by no means reassuring"* (Sanders in Ngara, 2009: ix). I submit to this Conference that a discipleship movement that does not take seriously leadership development, character formation and accountable mentorship for its members cannot heal and transform the world. It is about time that the church claims its rightful place in forming and shaping leaders that it will offer to our nations so that they will be agents of healing and transformation.

3. A transforming discipleship movement touches the world compassionately

Clinical sterility and transforming discipleship movement are concepts that cannot be pronounced together in one sentence. The concept of sterility is known in health sciences where the practitioner takes off their clothes and puts on sterile attire; scrubs their hands and puts on protecting gloves so that they will not be contaminated by their patient, and, in turn, will not contaminate their patient. The priest and the Levite in this parable represent a clinically sterile practitioner. They cannot be contaminated by a ritually unclean and wounded person, even if it is one of their own. And so in order to preserve their sterility they pass by on the other side.

A discipleship movement that insists on being sterile cannot bring about any transformation of a lasting impact in the world. A church that has made a decision to huddle together because they are of the same colour, they speak the same language, they share the same culture, cannot witness effectively to the diversity represented in the kingdom of God and therefore would miss every opportunity to transform the world. The story of the Good Samaritan is an invitation to the discipleship movement to intentionally touch the world in compassion. Didn't Jesus touch the blind man and afterwards commanded him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam. Didn't Jesus touch the leper and rendered him clean? Didn't Jesus allow himself to be touched by the woman who had the issue of the blood? Did not Jesus become a recipient of love through touch from a lady who was set free from demon possession? Here lies the mystery in the power of touch: Not only do we get to touch and restore others, they also touch and restore us in return. Not only do we get to be agents of healing for others through touch, they also minister healing to us as we touch them. In touching others, we do not only become a blessing to them; they also become a blessing to us.

This parable is addressed to a teacher of the Law – a clinically sterile practitioner. This guy has mastered the art of clinical sterility. This guy has proposed and passed policy, through religion, that would ensure that there is no contact between people of different races, cultures, ethnicities, and so forth. This guy's job was to ensure that the whole Jewish community was taught well in the dynamics of separation of peoples from each other. And Jesus says to him, your neighbour is not just the person who lives in close physical proximity to you; your neighbour is the person to whom you extend a healing touch. Anyone from whom you receive an invitation to extend a healing touch is your neighbour.

That is why Diana Ross sang this song¹³:

Reach out and touch somebody's hand. Make this world a better place, if you can. Reach out and touch somebody's hand. Make this world a better place, if you can.

¹³ "Reach out and touch" song, published by © EMI Music Publishing.

*Just try, take a little time out of your busy day. To give encouragement to someone who's lost the way. Just try, or would I be talking to a stone, if I asked you to share a problem that's not your own, oh, no
We can change things, if we start giving*

Just try, if you see an old friend on the street, and he's down; remember his shoes could fit your feet.

Just try, try a little kindness you'll see. It's something that comes very naturally, oh, yeah We can change things, if we start giving

It is clear from this song that unless we reach out and touch others, we can never make this world a better place.

4. A transforming discipleship movement smells the various scents of the world

Far from being a weak and unimportant sense, our odor-detecting ability is surprisingly acute and shapes our social interactions in ways we do not consciously realise. The human sense of smell is significant in that it facilitates, not always consciously, a variety of human social interactions, whether they be casual or intimate. It has been proven that some emotions people have are attached to their sense of smell. Researchers have concluded that some odours have the ability to bring up an emotional memory in people far more than seeing a picture or hearing a voice.

The world we live in has different scents and odors to which the disciple of Jesus needs to be sensitive. There is the smell of love and hate. There is the smell of joy and sadness. There is the smell of peace and war. There is the smell of brokenness and wholesomeness. There is the smell of woman and man. There is the smell of young and old. There is the smell of affluence and poverty. All these smells, and more, are present in the world we live in. All these kinds of smell sensitize us to the various experiences of life in the world. Some smells have attracting properties and other smells have repelling properties. Some smells arouse in us particular feelings and responses. Some smells remind us of particular events in our lives, whether pleasant or unpleasant. Some smells nauseate us and others tranquilize us. Some smells leave us with a bad taste in the mouth and others leave us screaming for more. A transforming discipleship movement needs to be sensitive to these smells.

What did the priest and the Levite smell from the man who was injured that made them pass by the other side? They smelled unclean. They smelled woundedness. They smelled destitution and degradation. They smelled inferiority. They smelled a dog. Through their sense of smell they were able to determine that this person was not worthy to receive care and attention from them. After all, the worthy ones were waiting for them in the place of worship and that is where they were heading to. What did the Samaritan smell from the injured man? He smelled a human being deserving of love, care and attention. He smelled a human being in need of restoration and wholeness. He smelled a child of God deserving of a second chance in life. Can you see that different perceptions of smell yield different reactions and actions from different people to the one situation? So, the question is: What do you smell? What kind of responses have you made to different situations and people as a result of your sense of smell? How have you made the world a better place as a result of your smell? An indifferent discipleship movement cannot heal and transform the world.

5. A transforming discipleship movement tastes the realities of life together with the world

My reading of this parable brings me to the conclusion that the Good Samaritan became a healing presence to the wounded man. He bandaged the man's wounds, after pouring oil and wine; took the man on his donkey; took the man to the inn and cared for him. That is a healing presence. By being present in this manner, he was able, in some way, to feel what this man felt. He was able, in some way, to immerse himself in the lived experience of this man. He was able, in some way, to appreciate what this man went through, and, as a result, was able to offer the healing that this man so desperately needed.

In my office people have to see me by appointment. One in a while, I will see that odd person who will come knocking at my door without making an appointment. I like the convenience and the tidiness of seeing people on appointment. I am able to prepare myself better when I know how many appointments I have for the day and what are the needs I have to address with each person. Some people need counselling, others need prayer, others need financial help, others need just someone to chat to, others need some form of advice, and so forth. My secretary keeps my diary very well. One day, someone came to knock at our offices without making an appointment. She seemed very distressed and sounded like she needed urgent attention. My secretary told her that she couldn't see me at that point in time and suggested that she should make an appointment. Frustrated, almost angry, this lady responded, "But how can you say Luvuyo can't see me? I saw him come in at the gate. There is his car in the parking lot. I know he is here." Audrey, becoming frustrated herself responded, "Yes, Luvuyo is present in the office, but unfortunately, not available to see you now."

I use this story as a parable of a church that is present in the world, yet unavailable to the world. This is a church whose buildings you can see, whose songs you can here and sometimes dance to, whose members decorate the streets with their colourful uniforms, yet are unavailable to the world. This is a church whose holy huddle separates and isolates them from the very world they are supposed to heal and transform. It's members are too busy holding meetings, too busy worshipping, too busy fighting with each other, too busy involved with maintaining the institution and are missing the opportunity to be available to the world. They are too busy ticking the attendance register at every convention and conference yet their attendance does not translate into any practical action that will make the world a better place. They are too busy passing resolution after resolution while the society to which they are called to minister is denied care and ministry. A discipleship movement whose taste buds have been numbed to the variety of flavours in the world cannot transform the world.

It has been said of Jesus that that which he didn't take, he couldn't save. He had to take the human nature in order for him to walk in the shoes of humanity. He had to take the human nature in order for him to understand the pain and suffering that comes with being human. He had to take the human nature in order for him to redeem humanity from all those things that entangled and kept humanity hostage. He had to take the human nature in order to transform humanity. That which he didn't take, he couldn't save. A discipleship movement that claims to follow Jesus and yet is unavailable to the world cannot transform the world.

Conclusion

You and I are part of this movement that is called to see, to listen, to touch, to smell and to taste the realities of life as experienced by God's people in the world. We cannot continue to walk by as if in a hurry to catch our next flight to heaven while a wounded person lies half dead along the road. We cannot continue on our way to church while walking over the bodies of those that have been wounded on the street. We cannot continue to be so heavenly bound that we become earthly useless because by so doing, we miss unique opportunities to transform the world.

May God bless you as you continue to explore what it means to be a transforming discipleship movement. Amen.