

## Learning by Doing

2 Kings 5:1-14

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

July 3, 2016

Pentecost 7 C

The phrase “learning by doing” is an old educational catch phrase, going way back even before I was young. It refers to learning by experience, for example, by putting together a lawn mower engine rather than just studying about the theory of internal combustion engines in textbooks. Or see how the two preschoolers in our image learn about plants by taking care of one. We learn better by experience, by participating in something, rather than just reading or studying about it. The concept goes back farther than liberal education theory in the 1920s—Jesus Christ had his disciples—and that word means learners or students—learning about God’s reign by actually going out and living it—an immersion experience, if you will. But we’ll get back to that later.

First, let’s look back to Elisha, who had learned how to be a prophet by following Elijah. The story of Elisha and Naaman involves healing from the disease of leprosy. As far as we can figure from reading the law and the stories of the Hebrews, the word leprosy didn’t mean just the leprosy that we identify today as Hanson’s Disease, but a variety of skin conditions. Some were very serious medically—Hanson’s Disease can cause terrible disfigurement, and the loss of extremities. Other conditions called leprosy were less serious, but all of them made a person in that culture unclean. Now that means they were cut off from normal human interaction, and couldn’t observe the rituals of their religion. Sometimes being unclean was temporary, and dependent on circumstances. Contact with blood, considered the life force, could make someone temporarily unclean. Once a month, a woman would be unclean. The priest and Levite who passed the injured traveler in the parable of the Good Samaritan may have been afraid that contact with his battered body would make them unclean. But a disease such as leprosy made a person unclean as long as he or she had the disease. Lepers couldn’t come into normal contact with other people, for fear of making them unclean, at least temporarily—it was like a quarantine. The fears around it are similar to the fears that people today have of a person with AIDS. So think about a time when you were in quarantine, or isolation, or when you felt cut off from other people for whatever reason, and you can sense a little bit of what it was like to have leprosy—to be unclean.

So imagine Naaman. He is a powerful Syrian general. Naaman is honored in the king’s court, because he has led his kingdom to victory over other nations, including Israel. There’s only one problem in Naaman’s life, and that is his skin. He has contracted leprosy. There is no known cure. Then his wife comes to him, saying that her servant girl, a young woman captured in one of his raids on Israel, has offered hope. Elisha, a prophet—a religious

leader—in Israel, she has heard, can cure even leprosy. He must have been a bit dubious, but he was willing to grasp at straws. The king of Syria even wrote him a letter of recommendation to the king of Israel, and threw in a caravan load of fine treasures to sweeten the deal. So Naaman packed up a caravan of camels bearing gifts and traveled to Israel. He went to palace, assuming that a man with such great power as Elisha, would be in the king's service. But the king of Israel thought that the whole thing was a setup, to give Syria an excuse to attack them again. Elisha reassures the nervous king, and tells the king to have the Gentile general meet him at his house. But then Elisha wouldn't even come out of his house to see him. Instead, the prophet sent instructions to go wash in the Jordan river. What? Was this another insult? The Jordan River was puny, ugly, dirty, compared to the beautiful streams of Syria. But another servant talked him into it. So he splashed into the water and out of the water seven times. And he was healed. For Naaman, the lesson that he learned by doing was one of learning to trust, not just in a prophet or holy man, but in the God of Israel. If he humbled himself to follow Elisha's instruction, God would do the rest.

Now to the Gospel lesson—to set the context of the story, Jesus, in Luke 9, had sent his closest disciples, the twelve, out on a field trip, and what was their assignment? To do the same things they had been watching Jesus do—he gave them power and authority to heal sicknesses and to drive out demons, as demonstrations that God's reign, God's kingdom, was coming here on earth. They went out and did as they were told, and village after village heard the good news and people were healed.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus sends out a larger group with similar instructions—72 people! When we think of the disciples, we usually only think of the inner 12, his closest followers. But Jesus had many followers, both men and women, who would stay with him as they could, for days, maybe weeks, maybe months, maybe a season. It was from this larger group that Jesus trained and authorized these followers to go two by two. He challenged them that the harvest was great but the laborers were few. They were warned that they were going to be lambs among wolves, that the way might be dangerous. They were instructed not to be burdened down with too much stuff, but to depend entirely on the hospitality of those whom they would try and convert. And they weren't to waste time in small talk, but to get on with the urgent business of calling people to a new relationship with God, and to bring healing on their way. The 72 go out and do their task, and come back celebrating and amazed at their wonderful results. The Rev. Christopher Henry summarizes it this way. "No longer safe on the sidelines, these followers are now sent out, to share peace and table fellowship, to cure the sick, to proclaim the kingdom of God. In short, they were called to live out and practice the faith that they had confessed. And it is in the doing

that the seventy [two] are transformed from bystanders to active participants in the work of God.

And then there is the command to go empty-handed. These disciples are to carry with them no money or swords to display power, no food or supplies, no sandals for their feet. They must leave all of these comforts and necessities at home. The seventy are armed with only a message: the kingdom of God has come near. This is their proclamation and it is their promise: the kingdom of God has come near. They are to speak these words to those who offer them hospitality and to those who do not. They are to be ambassadors for Christ; they are to live into God's vision for the world. They are to practice peace, do justice, perform the faith. After seeing what they had seen, after witnessing so much pain and so many miraculous moments, these followers were sent out to be doers of the word, to be kingdom carriers."<sup>1</sup> (Unquote.) The group were sent out on a mission of peace—to proclaim good news. People could take it or leave it, accept it or reject it—the important thing was that the word was spread, that peace was proclaimed. The villagers were given the opportunity to express hospitality, and the messengers the opportunity to receive it. "Eat what is set before you," Jesus said. Eating together became the opportunity for spreading the good news. Susan Kendall, a Presbyterian minister, says that is still true today; "food becomes a source of comfort—and an opportunity to strike up conversation. Rather than hunker down and isolate ourselves in frustration, we are blessed to meet people from all over the world. We can even share concerns, hopes, and dreams; we can say more than just what we do and where we live."<sup>2</sup>

This sending out of the seventy two was just as important for the followers of Jesus as it was for those who heard the good news. They were learning by doing. Their experience offers a preview of what would happen after the resurrection, the stories of the Book of Acts—how Good News would spread from person to person, town to town, country to country as the story of Jesus is told.

Several years ago, some of you went to New Orleans to help rebuild there after Katrina. Think of how much you learned. Over the past few years, we've focused on supporting the Caseyville food bank. Last summer, our congregation helped sponsor, and some of us were involved in, the Convoy of Hope. All our mission opportunities have also been learning opportunities. You have learned some things about Christian community and mission. You learned about what's at the heart of Christian mission—to love and serve others in Christ's name. Whether or living your faith by inviting a neighbor to church, or cleaning your neighbor's gutters, or putting together a funeral

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Day1.org.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Kendall, Living the Word, Christian Century, June 22, 2016, p. 18

dinner, or whatever, you're learning by doing, just as the 72 had done. And in those acts of love, you're announcing that God's reign is in our midst. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon