

Go and Do Likewise

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Episcopal Church
Pentecost 7, Proper 10, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary
July 15, 2007

Pam Kidd¹, an inspirational writer for Guideposts publications, received an interesting letter one day. It came from a Presbyterian missionary working in Harare, Zimbabwe, and it very plainly stated that she felt God was asking Pam to come to Zimbabwe to write about the orphans and street children there. Busy planning her daughter's wedding, and frankly, intimidated by the whole idea of going to Africa, Pam put the letter aside and went on with her life.

However, in the back of her mind, the letter haunted her. This missionary was so direct, and so certain of God's message; and so Pam decided that, at the very least, she owed this woman a reply. One thing led to another, and within a matter of weeks, Pam and her Presbyterian minister husband, David, found themselves landing at Harare airport to pay a visit to this missionary and learn more about Zimbabwe's needs.

The poverty that they encountered was, in her words, 'beyond imagining.' There were children in need everywhere—in fact, a significant percentage of Zimbabwe's children are orphans due to AIDS. Everywhere they went, they encountered hungry, ragged, barefoot children clutching at them and seeking food. The need was overwhelming, the problem so big that it seemed insurmountable. The missionary's work, while noble, hardly seemed to make a dent. Pam despaired at ever finding an uplifting story to share.

One person that the children talked happily about was the Tea and Bread Lady. Hoping for a bright spot in all this suffering, Pam and David set out early one morning to find her. They found her amidst a group of hungry children, serving hunks of bread and pouring hot tea into whatever dirty containers the children offered. Incredulous that this one woman with a broken down car and some vats of tea seemed to make such an impression, they helped to hand out the bread, and asked this woman if she was from a relief organization. Her answer was no, she did

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this on her own. Offers of help were few and far between, she said; people have good intentions of helping but then become scared or overwhelmed when faced with the sheer scope of the problems in Africa. What she wanted more than anything was for ‘someone to make a lasting commitment to these children.’

Inside of her, Pam felt a number of feelings rise—pity, outrage, a sense of helplessness. Where could this woman get the help she needed? Who would help her, help these children? Where was God in all this—and why wasn’t God doing something about this?

Silently, Pam prayed, *God, why aren’t you helping this lady? Why don’t you send someone?*

Silence—and then a voice replied, *I did. I sent you.*

Today’s parable of the Good Samaritan is a familiar one—perhaps too familiar. We know of the Samaritan’s mercy and good works, how he responded to a stranger’s needs, and thus, treated him as a neighbor. We know that one of the clear messages of this parable is that we are called upon to treat others with mercy—loving our neighbor as ourselves and helping to tend to their immediate needs. That’s what it’s all about, right? Good guy shows up and saves the day, gets the hurt guy the help he needs, drops him off somewhere safe with money to spare, and goes on his way. Simple, clean, and done, right?

Not so fast.

Being a ‘good samaritan’ is about more than one-shot, short term acts of mercy or heroism (no matter what they media may think). After all, being a good neighbor is not something one does every once in a while, when the mood strikes us. The very word ‘neighbor’ implies relationship—our lives intersect over fences and driveways and in grocery stores and

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schoolyards. We belong to the same community, sharing parks and resources and roadways, griping about the same issues, cheering on the same teams. Those who were once strangers become friends, joined by our common ground.

As Christians, and children of God, we too are joined together by common ground—our Lord Jesus. We are bound together by covenant, by the love of a God whose ever-widening arms always have room to welcome one more. We belong to one another just as much as we belong to our Savior and God—sharing in the one bread, the one cup. Being a neighbor in the community of our Lord means to belong to a community of commitment, of relationship—and not just once in a while, random acts of kindness.

However, we are not called to stay safely within our own community. Just as the Samaritan of our gospel story extended himself in love while traveling through a land not his own, so we too are sent out into the world to bring others to know the love of God. We are a missionary people, a sent people—following the lead of Christ who was always on the move, and encouraging others to ‘go and make disciples’ to the end. Just as the seventy of last week’s gospel reading were sent out, just as the apostles were sent out, just as Paul was sent out, so we too are sent out into that mission field we call our neighborhood.

But there is a difference between being sent and actually going. The priest and the Levite of our Gospel story were sent, as we all are, to show forth God’s mercy as they traveled throughout their everyday lives—but they choose not to go. Instead, they closed the doors of their hearts, refusing to see that that we are already joined together in relationship as loved creations of the One God. The Samaritan who chose to go to this man’s side and care for him saw not just a stranger in need, but a neighbor with whom he shared common ground, common

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life. His commitment toward a God-like life of mercy, and love, and generosity is evident in the way he gives of his time and resources to bring the other to full health.

But what about us? We are sent, but do we actually ‘go’? Do we choose to see and respond to the broken and hurting on life’s highways and byways—or do we hurry by in a vain attempt to keep ourselves safe and sheltered? We may readily react to the accident victim by the roadside, but we are sent among so many others as well—the lonely kid at the end of the lunch table, the caregiver who needs a break, the disabled person who seeks to be seen as a whole person. We are sent to take a risk, get involved, get messy, to give of ourselves as well as our checkbooks.

Pam Kidd found this out in that blinding moment while helping the Tea and Bread Lady of Harare. She desperately wanted to pretend that she hadn’t heard those fateful words—*I sent you*—while standing on a Harare roadside, but she could not. Instead, she chose to go where she was sent—and offered a commitment of real help to the community of Zimbabwe. Back home in the States, she and her husband raised funds to further the Tea and Bread Lady’s ministry as well as expand it to include other services to homeless mothers and children. However, they did not stop there—in the past eight years, a countryside orphanage has been founded and schooling has been provided for many. Pam makes yearly trips to Zimbabwe, finding herself spiritually fed each time she goes. What started as a reluctant letter reply has flourished into a life-giving relationship across continents, turning strangers into neighbors, joined in God’s love.

May we go and do likewise. Amen.

¹ Kidd, Pam; *The Letter*; Guideposts magazine; July 2007; Volume LXII, Issue 5; page 72