

Some of you may have heard the joke about the hapless man who was looking for his keys under a streetlight. A passerby takes pity on him. Trying to help, she asks where exactly he lost them. “In the park,” he says. “That’s nowhere near here; why are you looking here?” The man answered, “It’s the only place with enough light to see.”

That human nature makes us acutely sensitive to loss is well known. As is our reluctance to leave our comfort zones. But seldom do we consider how these two tendencies interact. The most prominent reactions to most news stories of loss are reassertions of previous opinions, prejudices, or agendas, because that’s convenient. Less so is digging into the facts to understand the underlying causes and perhaps start grappling for a solution, or, you know, actually helping the suffering. And while we may credibly forgive ourselves for not dropping everything and personally committing to do whatever it takes to remedy every crisis, we have no credibility if we make a crisis about ourselves, or willfully blind ourselves to the larger reality. Walking in circles around a streetlight accomplishes nothing, and the light we thought was helping us only renders us helpless to see where a real solution might be found.

Contrast this with what Jesus told his followers to do. Jesus identified the problems of personal physical and spiritual suffering, and larger social forces that left ordinary people harassed and helpless. Beyond this intellectual assessment, he was also deeply emotionally moved, and determined to help them directly, offering teaching and healing. But he was only one man, and we might wonder if his appeal to “the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest,” expresses not just faith, but also frustration and exhaustion.

Jesus identified solutions, too. He called ordinary people to be his followers. He knew them, and loved them, and knew perfectly well that they were not ready for the task he had in mind. They had not been with him long enough to learn enough to be reliable, or even useful, on their own. They had no resources. But they would not be going out to offer themselves, but rather, the good news of God’s love for humanity. They would not be offering their own knee-jerk reactions to the world’s problems, but manifestations of God’s grace. They would show God’s grace to be abundant and efficacious — sufficient to the needs of humanity.

It’s true that Jesus sent them to the people who were most like themselves. Please don’t get hung up on that point. We hear this reading two weeks after the Day of Pentecost, but it takes place early in Jesus’s public ministry. This story is merely laying the groundwork, establishing the pattern, for the mission Jesus sets out at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, the mission to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that [Jesus] commanded... .” At this early moment, Jesus judged, rightly, that his disciples would be most effective among people who shared their culture and their essential spiritual beliefs.

Yet don’t overlook what a radical mission this was. Yes, they were going to

people with whom they had things in common, but the radical part lay in the notion of “going to.” All the disciples had ever known was the relative security and predictability of life in their small home villages, their comfort zones, where extended family was always present to provide material and emotional security. An ordinary person in such a village might only meet a few hundred people in the course of her whole life.

Leaving their villages was radical enough, but the truly radical thing about Jesus’s sending plan was how it turned the very notion of spiritual encounter upside down, or perhaps inside out. For all their conflicts, Jews, Samaritans, and pagans had one thing in common: religion meant going away. Whether they worshipped at Jerusalem, Mount Gerizim, or a temple to a pagan deity, everyone who sought an encounter with the divine had to grab a staff, strap on their sandals, hit the road, and hope for the best. That God could come to you, through the faithfulness of an ordinary person, was revolutionary.

Yet like most religious concepts, this one had deep roots. The disciples’ ministry to their peers was not so different from the example of Moses, a flawed but faithful man, whose encounter with God gave him a mission to return to his own people with a message, and a reality, of liberation. Like Moses, they would have to overcome opposition, endure hardships, and accept a different way of life. For their mission was a response to what God initiated, and only one small part of God’s greater plan for humanity.

Nevertheless, this small part accomplished great things for the world. The disciples left their comfort zone, and they brought the light of God’s love with them, shining into new places, finding the lost, giving people hope and real solutions, revealing anew that God loved them, and always had. The world has changed a lot since then, but human nature is much the same. People still need to know the truth about who God is, and there’s still no better way than leaving our comfort zones to tell — and show — the reality that God loves every one of us.

If anything, the need is greater now, for the technologies that could be used to spread this message are also being used to advance dark, twisted messages of intolerance, greed, and fear. If we stay in our reassuring pool of light, the rest of the world will believe the dark whispers they hear, and they will associate Christianity with the things Jesus struggled against. For example, even though the Civil Rights Movement grew out of, was organized in, and was supported by, the Church, more and more people today believe the lie that the Church is somehow inherently racist — including some people in the Church! Yet Jesus made it perfectly clear that his mission of offering reconciliation, redemption, and right relationship with God was intended for literally everyone on earth, and that the measure of Christian faithfulness is love, not power.

That’s not the only reason why I wanted to do some study and celebration of the Civil Rights Movement. I’ve been disturbed to learn that much of the bias, diversity,

and anti-racism programming out there today has been shown, empirically, to be ineffective, or even to do more harm than good, so I wondered, what would happen if we deliberately did the opposite of what doesn't work? Some programming leaves people with the impression that racism is intractable and progress is impossible, but as St. Paul points out, Christians are supposed to be hopeful people, and the pilgrimage will help us see how application of Gospel principles to contemporary social problems ensured that enduring progress was made. Some programming engenders the very closed-mindedness, defensiveness, and division it purports to oppose; we're going to see how dedicated Christians changed hearts and minds, built a diverse coalition, and accomplished much healing. By getting us out of our familiar homes and routines and learning the facts and the theological underpinning of this Movement, which actually helped millions of people, we will be better prepared to engage the needs of the world today, interpersonal, social, and spiritual.

In a world scarred by losses Jesus reminded his followers, "You received without payment; give without payment." We have been richly blessed, and as always, the question is how God is calling us to use our blessings. Not everyone has to go on the pilgrimage — not everyone can; there aren't enough spots — but everyone can do *something* to increase the felt presence of God's love in this world. All of us can resolve to follow the examples of the first disciples, to listen for our calling and to go where Jesus would have us go, rather than where seems comfortable or convenient to us, and become the light the world needs in the places where the world needs it, enlightening the world through encounters with the love of God.