

OUT THERE

A Sermon on Luke 10:1-11, 16-17—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
July 3, 2016—First United Church of Christ (Congregational), Milford, CT

1.

- Stay on the path.
- Don't talk to wolves.
- Bread crumbs get eaten by birds.
- Sheep aren't always sheep and grandmothers aren't always grandmothers.
- If you lose a shoe, keep the other one in case you need to prove it was yours.
- No matter how shiny it is, never take apples from strangers.
- Watch out for trolls under bridges.
- Be nice to woodcutters; they may prove handy in a pinch.

If we were to write a concise manual for traveling fairy tale characters/protagonists, that might be a good start.

Of course, what would be the point of fairy tales if Snow White had declined the Evil Queen's apple or Gretel had brought her GPS? Still, for the sake of those intrepid girls and boys, princes and princesses, pigs and fairies, much strife could have been averted if only they had followed the rules we have learned by listening to their stories.

2.

We can gain something by listening to today's Scripture reading. Jesus realizes that instead of just making cold calls on towns in Galilee and Samaria, he can train pairs of disciples to go ahead of him to do some healing and proclaiming of the kingdom. They are a warm-up act before the headliner comes rolling in. They are a barometer to see where people are open to Jesus' ministry. Will this message make it in Peoria? Jesus may save himself some time and the disciples will get some practical experience under their belts sharing good news.

So Jesus hands out hot off the presses, autographed copies of his first edition book, Out

There: A Manual on Ministry for Jesus' Disciples (AKA, The Art of the Good News).

3.

But his manual is not just about Good News. In fact, you could say that a majority of it covers the potential for bad news.

Bad News #1: "We're understaffed." Jesus liked to use agricultural analogies, saying, the harvest is plenty, but the laborers are few, but you get the picture. We could really use some extra help. Too bad. You don't go out there with the disciples you want, you go with the disciples you have. And I have you.

Bad News #2: "You don't know what you'll find what you start sharing the news of the Kingdom out there. There's lots of distractions so keep your head down on your way. Stay on the path. Don't talk with wolves. There will be many people who frankly won't be open to your message. When you offer people a spirit of peace, they may say 'no thanks. Naysayers will abound. In that case, head somewhere else to find a meal. Avoid poisoned apples."

Bad News #3: "In the likelihood that people don't accept you and your message, wipe the dirt off your bare feet, but don't leave without first reminding them the Kingdom will come, ready or not."

Jesus makes it clear that failure and antagonism are inevitable experiences when you follow him or in this case go ahead of him into the world. It's more than a little scary at times.

4.

Today we could update Jesus' manual with new scenarios and rules of engagement for Christians and church leaders with the world:

- Bring business cards with a catchy motto and a memorable logo.

- Make sure they check out your updated website and savvy Twitter messages.
- Get a booth at Pirates Day, the Oyster Festival, and take advantage of opportunities in the community to share your story.
- Don't scare people with your message. Instead engage them in conversation about family, sports or the weather. You and they are people, not just a fisher and a fish with God as bait.

We could also add warnings about the kinds of people who may not be as receptive to our message:

- Nones, who may have never truly paid attention to religion or faith, or have never believed;
- Dones, who feel burned by or burnt out by a faith tradition;
- People of other faiths who may feel defensive by us sharing our message;
- Then there's haters and doubters, cynics and curmudgeons, passive-aggressive and aggressive-aggressive, blamers and the like.

Watch out for trolls under the bridges where we engage the world and the world engages us.

I have heard several of you tell me stories of trying to speak with family and friends about your faith and your beliefs of what God intends for this world and getting at best shut down. I have heard you speak of seeking to pass along your faith to children and spouses who don't care the least about what this faith tradition urges for us as God's people. I have seen people who won't be troubled to spend their time worshipping God when they feel abandoned by God because of experiences of alienation, injustice, grief.

We can't get the message out or it falls on deaf ears. We have seen the difference it makes in the lives of people inside and outside the church but it seems there are places the good news just won't be received. Do we cut our losses, shake the dirt off our feet, and move on?

All the apathy and antagonism makes us want to curl up into our little shells, hide behind our

manuals on ministry out there, board up the doors to our church, and just keep to ourselves.

5.

But there is hope in Jesus' words to his disciples. First of all, Jesus has them work in pairs. Right there, Jesus is countering the vulnerability that the disciples may feel sticking their necks out by doing it with a partner (I know as half of a clergy couple how exhilarating it can be to work with one other person in ministry and proclaiming good news). If there is a spirit of peace between the two disciples, then that spirit goes with them even if it doesn't flow between them and the people they meet.

Second, Jesus ensures further engagement by telling them to pack lightly. Without a bag, a purse (yes, these were men originally, so they obviously had man purses!), sandals, or even food packed, the disciples didn't have the luxury of pretending to be self-sufficient. As they were offering the bread of life to those with ears to listen they were hopefully being offered the bread of yeast and flour. Jesus' manual on ministry encouraged mutual support.

Jesus does assume that some people will receive the message of peace and the kingdom with open ears and open arms. Jesus' world was not just filled with trolls, evil queens, and wolves in sheep's clothing. For every grouch there might be a fairy godmother or a lovely princess or prince charming. There might even be frogs transformed into princes under the right circumstances.

Jesus' manual makes it clear, though, the news of the coming Kingdom is to be declared both to the open-eared people and those who are stiff necked and uninterested in the message of Jesus.

6.

And here lies some of the best news of today's reading: In God's Kingdom, all people deserve to hear the message of the Kingdom and choose whether to participate in it. We are called to share out there because it's not really our job to

determine who is worthy of it, on a foundational level God's Kingdom is for everybody and therefore should be proclaimed universally, to baby bunting and Grandmother, wolf and pig, troll and beautiful princess.

The good news is also that the message is about the Kingdom, not about us or our church or all the awesome things our church does. I mean, our church does do some awesome things, but anybody could try to feed kids or rebuild houses. What we're about and what we can't forget is that God calls us to be this together, that is the realm God is seeking to establish.

The Kingdom exists out there, outside the church, at least as much as it does in here. Jesus calls his disciples to go out because while proclaiming the kingdom they are establishing it where it belongs, in the world, not just here. While we have wonderful worship—with music, hospitality, prayers, and preaching; great coffee hours; and engaging Sunday School and youth ministry, they are all based on the belief that the Holy Spirit lives with us all our hours and days.

The Kingdom of God comes closer when the in here and out there intersect, when people are willing to fail, when people risk themselves in love to God and to the other. This was evident when we hosted the recent interfaith vigil after the Pulse Night Club shootings. Yes, it felt weird to be standing in a circle with people who pray to a very similar but not quite the same God, and to do so in a time of grief. But the riskiness of sharing our faith practices was so worth it too because we were all taking a calculated risk in coming together that we might not get to do or say what is most comfortable to us but there was a whole lot of love and vulnerability shared when we needed to not feel like we had to hide in our comfort zones to be safe. Our vigil together transcended the senselessness of the previous day's violence in Orlando.

As Jesus suggests in his concise manual, the Kingdom of God is based largely on the rule of peace, and peace means mutual humility and mutual authenticity. When disciples come into a house, declare God's peace and that peace rests in that house, it is an amazing experience. It's what mission trip groups usually experience at the beginning of their week when after a long day of travel, an organization or church receives them, feeds them, prays with them, cradles that spirit of God's peace between them and prepares to empower them to serve God and neighbor in that community. We've seen it in Maine, Virginia, Kentucky, New Orleans, and now Texas.

The best news, though, I think, is that we are not the headliners in ministry. We are just an opening act. God uses us to gauge the spirit in people and communities, God empowers us to come together with others in a spirit of God's Kingdom, God reminds us even on Independence Day weekend that as good and great independence is, mutual dependence in the Spirit is even better, and dependence on God's grace is the best ever. We are at best an opening act that allows others to see God's love through Jesus and for us to remember God's love in our own lives.

While the trolls and wolves may not ever go away, while there numbers may even increase in a secular western world, and haters may feed off of world news of violence done in the name of God, God assures us that we have allies and partners in living in God's Kingdom. We are understaffed but the harvest is out there waiting. We are far from perfect, humble creatures outgunned by the world, but our job is to offer God's priceless gift of peace. The lives out there and in here mean so much to God. Out there but for the grace of God we go. Amen.