

Two weeks ago I shared with you the story of an award winning photojournalist who took a series of pictures while a woman drowned along the Massachusetts shore. Here's the story again, this time in the words of the photographers and with the images of that day's events.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcGZhXAI9M8>

“At the last second, something stopped him.” Say that out loud with me.

How many times has something stopped you at the last second? You were ready to do something dramatic that would have helped someone; you were ready to step outside your comfort zone; you were about to say something that you would have never said before; you were about to talk to a stranger; you were on the verge of going out of your way to say or do something for a neighbor or co-worker. What was it that made you stop? Why did you hesitate when you could have acted?

Hearing Marcus Halevi tell that story about the photographs and seeing the images of the woman washed away in the surf; you understand why so many questioned his judgment, his seeming lack of compassion and his unwillingness to act on behalf of someone else.

Jesus told a parable about a shepherd and his sheep to illustrate God's willingness to do whatever it takes to extend his love to the least, the last and the lost. Listen to the parable from Matthew 18:12-14

12 “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? 13 And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. 14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

So I have a question for you today.

Are you willing to do whatever it takes to reach the unreached?

In the parable, we see that the shepherd [God] was willing to do whatever it takes to find the one lost sheep; even leaving behind the 99 that were safely in his care. Now it is important to note that the shepherd valued all the sheep; but, when the shepherd left behind the 99 in order to search for the one that was lost; he demonstrated that the lost sheep was even more valuable. And the value of that one lost sheep meant that he would do whatever it takes.

Now, before we go any further, how do you think those 99 sheep felt? Do you think they were jealous? Do you think they questioned the shepherd spending all his time looking for one when he could be content with 99? Can you imagine them making comments about that lost sheep while they munched on green grass and drank from still water?

Or do you think that it was more likely that the 99 gathered together to figure out how they, along with the shepherd, could find the lost sheep? After all, they were sheep and who better to think like sheep. Do you think they gathered together and prayed for the lost sheep? Do you think that they got their heads together and sought out answers as to why a sheep would leave the fold, or what would make the lost sheep even want to come back? Do you think they tried to understand that lost sheep- his lifestyle, his mindset, his worldview so that they could get to know him better and be a part of his life?

So let me ask my question again: Are you willing to do whatever it takes to reach the unreached?

A pastoral friend recently wrote about his first appointment. It was in the upper reaches of the state in one of those small crossroad communities where 'flat-landers' are not welcome. (I understand that to an extent because in my first appointment they called me a 'flat-lander.')

The not welcome sign came through in many different ways including threatening phone calls and even being run off the sidewalk by a person in a car.

Ministry in that community was anything but pleasant for Gary and his wife. The people didn't want him; and Gary didn't want to be there. But then he had a dream. I'll let him tell it in his own words:

"I had a dream one night that "right-sized" my heart about this appointment. I dreamt I was sitting on the front steps of the church as people of all shapes and sizes and ages paraded by—hunched over, bent low, dressed in tattered and filthy rags. I recoiled at the sight. And then something happened. As they walked past they turned to face me. Every one of them bore the image and likeness of Christ. A dream like that will do something to you."

Six years later, (and by the way, did I mention that the DS told Gary he only needed to stay there for one year?) Gary and his family left that community; but not before the church had grown tremendously. And why did it grow? Because when Gary began to see the lost sheep as individuals who bore the image and likeness of Jesus they saw the face of Jesus in Gary.

Gary has a shepherd's heart! And Gary is willing to do whatever it takes to reach the unreached. I'll tell you something else about Gary in a moment.

What about you? Have you looked into the eyes and faces of the people that you pass each day? Do you see Jesus in their eyes? Do you see them in a way that allows you to get to know them and understand their life?

Jesus reminds us in another parable about sheep and shepherds that the good shepherd knows his sheep. I've come to realize over the last several months that for Linglestown Life to fulfill our mission we all need to become missionaries. And that means that all of us need to become students of the culture and people who live around us. (Like the good shepherd we need to know the sheep!)

A few weeks ago the staff and I spent an afternoon trying to see what fulfilling our mission would look like. As a result of that time together we came up with a vision statement. It's what we're discerning as the vision that needs to drive us individually and corporately to fulfill our mission, to be missionaries to the people that we live with and among.

Here's what that vision statement says:

We are a missional people that:

- Live our faith beyond Sundays;
- Connect with people outside the church;
- Build relationships that allow others to explore faith; and
- Encourage people to grow as disciples of Jesus.

There is a lot that needs to go into making this vision a reality but I know that if we have a passion for the last, the least and the lost we can see it come to reality. And the first step in making this vision a reality will be for us to see the face of Jesus in the people who pass by us each day and realize that God is calling us to be willing to do whatever it takes to reach the unreached.

Gary also wrote about an encounter he recently had on an airplane.

[He was] headed to Phoenix where [he] would be. [Having] been on the road quite a bit and dog-tired: [it was] the kind of tired when you just want to be left alone. The middle seat I was hoping would remain open got filled by a 22 year-old female college graduate. I was sitting on the aisle seat with my eyes shut when the plane began to shutter. A hand grabbed my arm. "Sorry about that," she said, "I hate flying. I guess it's because I'm afraid of dying."

Now, you don't let an opportunity like this pass no matter how tired you are. I pried my eyes open and looked over at her. She had a death grip on the armrests. I asked her why she was afraid of dying. Her story went back to her experience as a child in the church. She said she grew up in a very religious family. Even though she said she got "saved" at age 10 she heard over and over again that she wasn't measuring up. Every experience she had in her church confirmed for her that God was angry with her. She had grown weary of trying to gain God's approval. She looked at me and said, "I stopped going to church because I got tired of hearing how bad I am. I just wanted to hear some good news."

Again, you don't let an opportunity like this pass no matter how tired you are. "What is your name?" I asked. "Bethany." "Bethany, can I share some good news with you?" "Sure." I told her about how much God loved her just as she is and about God's grace, which she doesn't have to earn, and that because of Jesus heaven is a present reality for her. She stopped me and asked, "Just what is it you do for a living?" I told her my job was to make sure there were churches being started just for people like her to bring them good news.

Pastor Adam was reflecting on that story and pointed out to me that most people will hear that story and say, 'That kind of stuff never happens to me.' But as Adam noted we've probably all had those opportunities, it's just that most of us never take advantage of them. And after a while those opportunities probably go by the wayside because God knows that we stop at the last second. We stop, leaving the person wondering if anyone will be there to answer their question or reach out a hand.

Friends, the Bethany's of this world are starving for some Good News! They are standing on the edge facing an angry ocean of crashing waves. Where are they going to find Good News if not through us? Who is going to share that Good News with them if we don't?

You've heard my question; now I want you to personalize it and ask yourself: "Am I willing to do whatever it takes to reach the unreached?"

Am I willing to push past whatever has stopped me in the past?

Am I willing to learn about the lost, the last and the least so that I can develop a relationship with them?

Am I willing to look into the faces of those I pass each day to see the face of Jesus?

Am I willing to be a missionary to the people around me who are lost and looking for purpose and meaning to life?

Am I willing to be there for the Bethany's even when it is inconvenient for me and create an environment; whatever it takes; so that Bethany can hear Good News?

So what is God calling you to do to reach the unreached? Something in today's message has spoken to you and I want to encourage you to respond to that voice of God as God moves upon your heart.