

Standing in the Middle

Luke 8:49-9:8

Sunday, January 13, 2019

The common understanding of mission's work in the U.S. today is that someone has a calling to a country, an ethnic community or area of the world; then they find people to support them for this mission. This model assumes that missions is someplace other than where you live and that the U.S. is not a mission field but a place to recruit members to build the church to do more work in a mission field, which is someplace else. We then train these missionaries in cross-culture methods, provide necessary strategies on how to reach their group and then send them off to do their work. Indeed, this is one way to pursue missions, but not the only way.

This model served the church when the U.S. seemed to be more monolithic in its cultural acceptance of Christianity, but it is completely outdated today. Something else must stand in its place. And like all fresh ideas for the church it must come from the scriptures; especially from the life and work of Jesus. But first I would like to tell you the story of a man many know well in this church, Ken Bailey. You have used his lectures on the bible and the Middle East to inform us of the meaning of Jesus' birth, the parables, and of the cross and resurrection, but for most of us, we know little of his life.

He has lived in the Middle East for over forty years. But what do we know of the Middle East in the last forty years? Swift changes in government, hatred for the U.S. and small groups of terrorists who have tried to instill fear by capturing and holding hostage citizens from around the world. Ken Bailey was there during all of this. When others decided to leave he stayed. While his friends were being captured and held hostage he decided to stay. He continued to teach, raise a family and pray for his neighbors. In many of his interviews he states when asked why he stayed, "Sometimes the greater witness for Christ is to stay put and love and pray with your neighbors." What was happening in the country was not only happening to them, it was happening to him. This was his place, these were his neighbors. National citizenship was secondary to kingdom citizenship. How could he leave his neighbors when things got rough? He decided to stand in the middle of life with his neighbors. He didn't

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go to the Middle East to work and then come home; it became his home.

The two stories in Luke we read this morning are examples of Jesus' missionary purpose and reflect the decisions of people like Ken Bailey. In the first story Jesus moves through the crowd responding to a cry for help of a man whose daughter is dying. Jesus gets there too late and despair has filled the family. They suggest to Jesus that he can go because there is nothing to be done but Jesus disagrees. He said, "Do not fear, only believe." They believed because they went with Jesus. When he healed his daughter, he healed more than her, he healed their hopelessness.

We must point out that Jairus is "a leader of the synagogue." He is a man that holds power in the community and most likely critical of Jesus' statements and use of authority. But when faced with his daughter's life he humbles himself to someone that he knows as a healer. Jesus puts himself in the middle of life, in order to be a messenger of God.

The second story tells a different side of missions. Jesus sends his disciples out into the community without him, to do what he was doing. He told them to go into a city and stay there. Take nothing with you and stay with those who welcome you. Jesus sends them out empty, vulnerable to hunger, shelter and protection. He sends them to stand in the middle of people with the words and deeds of hope. That is all they have accept the neighbors they make along the way. They did what Jesus did—move within the neighborhood building hope and becoming a conduit to God.

Mission's is not necessarily going to some foreign country and teaching the gospel, it is embodying the word, standing in the middle of life with people and watching the power of God renew faith again. It is the same for an inner-city ministry that has been abandoned, as well as the suburbs where wealth and achievement have replaced spiritual direction with watered-down platitudes that don't rock the boat. The church's mission is to stand in the middle of life with its neighbors, to shake them up and to pull them up, with the power and comfort of God's message of love.

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