



Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55403
(612) 332-3421
www.westminstermpls.org

Gaining (Dis)traction

Brennan Blue

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Psalm 8; Luke 10:25-37

The national wildlife federation defines invasive species as any kind of living organism that is not native to an ecosystem and which causes harm by spreading aggressively and overwhelming an otherwise balanced ecosystem. Our youth define invasive species with a series of groans and exasperation.

Stubborn and challenging, the removal of invasives is always an impactful mission trip memory. This summer didn't disappoint, providing two very distinct experiences.

In the rolling reaches of Quarry Hill Nature Center in Rochester, our middle schoolers fought hard to remove patches of buckthorn from amidst a great thorny forest threatening to overwhelm an old oak savannah. Our park hosts cheered us on as we crawled on hands and knees, cutting thick thorny stems and hauling the biomass away. They shared how impressed they were with our hard work and what a difference it makes to have groups like ours working together to reclaim a healthy habitat. We left that site feeling exhausted, but fulfilled, knowing that we did our part to make a difference in a larger problem.

Many of our high schoolers, in fact, worked on the very same project back in 2013 and we were able to point out previous patch of progress to this year's group. So I knew our high schoolers would be ready and willing to dig into the hard and daunting work of invasives when we were asked do our part with Colorado's "cheatgrass" problem on the very first work day of our trip.

Cheatgrass is an invasive annual grass with a short life cycle and prolific seed production. It can be easily recognized by the anger that wells up inside of you after attempting to pull it for hours on end. Now, nearly two weeks out, most of us are still finding its splayed seeds with burr-like fingers in our socks and shoes.

We of course rolled up our sleeves and got to work, but, wow, the cheatgrass was everywhere. We'd pull and clip and bag, pull and clip and bag, only to find more and more stretches of the stuff taunting us around every corner, its dry seedy thickets laughing in the breeze.

That's when things really became difficult, because suddenly our invasive problem was more than just cheatgrass. One of our park guides, bless his heart, began a steady stream of commentary about what little difference this would probably make in the grand scheme of things. There was just too much. Our efforts probably wouldn't matter.

As a trip leader, I could feel those invasive influences of apathy and despair began to creep in; see it spread through the worksite, sapping at our spirits. The need remained clear but problem now seemed insurmountable. Despite hauling bags and bags of the stuff back down the mountain path, several of us left feeling rather defeated.

While this proved a helpful experience to learn and reflect upon together, there was a clear difference between the hope of making our small buckthorn impact in Rochester and the despondency that now colored our bags of cheatgrass.

The mindset we bring to our mission will drive us, one way or another, toward action or apathy.

These divergent experiences made me think of the parable of the Good Samaritan, and why it is that even the most well-trained priest or Levite may walk on by a neighbor in need.

On the hand, this parable reminds us that we are called to put our faith and love into action, plain and simple. Yet this parable occurs in a vacuum. There is one person of need, one act of love to counter the one great injustice at hand.

But what happens when there's another neighbor in need along the way? Do you set aside the first to help the second? What if each step brings another worry or need, bigger and more complex than the one before it?

Perhaps you know the feeling. Confronted with a complex constellation of needs and problems surrounding our lives and communities, it's easy to become overwhelmed. Another election argument, another policy change, another broken relationship. Another act of hate and discrimination, another single parent facing another night on the street with her family, another police shooting in our city. Another setback, another neighbor in need.

How can you or I keep up with it all, let alone make a difference? Maybe it's best to just take a break from the headlines, find a new game on our smartphone and just sort of take our mind off of things.

Apathy subdues our action. Despair clouds our hope. Distraction does exactly what it describes – it dis-tractions us and robs us of a way forward. These invasive influences make it easier to check out than dig in.

See, I've always sort of assumed that the young lawyer in this parable is asking the question "who is my neighbor" from a relatively blank slate. But it's clear that this young lawyer knows his stuff. Remember, Jesus asks him what is written in the Scriptures regarding eternal life, and that beautifully succinct response of "you shall love God, and love your neighbor as yourself" comes from him.

So what if his follow up question - who is my neighbor? - is coming less from a place of innocence or ignorance and more from a place of knowing exhaustion? What if this young lawyer has eyes to see the many people around him who represent his neighbor and with a dizzying head is simply trying to figure out where to even begin?

I found help and hope for this very question on the second workday of our high school trip while building new trails at Young Gulch, a beloved national forest area now closed to the public due to past fire and flooding damage. With hardhats, picks, shovels, ropes and rock bars, we hiked a mile and half up and into our new worksite carrying the hope of a new day. It was there, while shoveling, sawing, lifting and hauling, that we were introduced to the art trail building and the important work of finding the critical edge.

In terms of trail building, the critical edge forms the crucial guiding line from which you begin and orient your work. It is the marker between path and planet, trail and wilderness. Your footing and direction are both determined from there, and though countless shrubs and boulders may lie ahead and around, the critical edge marks where you will carve out your 30" wide path, and that is what makes the work doable. So for our team of 30 students and 6 adults, this critical edge became our path by which to walk and work. And work we did! It was like being blessed with the gift of traction. Our critical edge to guide us, we literally dug in and blazed new trails that others, we hope, may follow and enjoy for years to come.

This process of finding traction for our work was brought home in a new workshop that we incorporated into our mission trips this year. A workshop called "Mission Possible."

Essentially, Mission Possible is an exercise that challenges multiple groups to take on a complex and often overwhelming social problem using a very limited set of "dealt resources." The creative challenge is to find which crucial slice of the problem your team wants to focus on and then leverage your limited resources to make the greatest possible impact.

Our middle schoolers, for example, engaged the pervasive issue of bullying. One of our groups sought to build empathy and awareness in the face of bullying using their granted resources of 100 glass jars, a theater and a little start-up money. These middle schoolers devised an educational theatre performance called the Glass Jar Foundation. Hired actors would portray the drama and consequences of bullying, each with a symbolic glass jar that cracks under the emotional strain for bullies and victims alike. They'd target school groups for their performances and then crowdsource funds to tour the show around the country.

Our high schoolers engaged the issue of climate change. Here, one of our groups sought to engage food waste and food deserts as their slice of the problem. Using their resources of 3 volunteer workers, 100 smart phones and 17 wooden picnic baskets, they dreamed up a dynamic social network to monitor and respond to food deserts in urban environments. Smartphones would be freely distributed to those willing to survey and report local food availability. Their volunteer workers would monitor the ups and downs in the local food system and arrange targeted micro-food drives to connect those in need with surplus food in surrounding areas. The wooden baskets would of course be used for transport/delivery, with a pinterest-worthy picture taken of each delivery basket to raise awareness and interest on social media.

Middle schoolers using glass jars to build empathy. High school students using wooden baskets to raise awareness via social media. Neither of these ideas will knock out the layered, complex problems of bullying and climate change, but they do provide a way forward, a critical edge to ward off apathy and dig into action. The goal here is to root out those invasive influences of distraction and despair, and then live out our calling by putting our faith into action. We don't have to move every boulder, but we do need to discern and then do our part.

That, I believe, is what Jesus is getting at in this parable: connecting exposed belief to explicit action. Even if this young lawyer is asking "who is my neighbor" from a place of overwhelming apathy and despair, there is hope in Jesus' simple response. Know who you are and who your neighbors are, and even if you can only reach out to one, do it. Put your faith into action, even if others are walking by. Be that very inspiration. Host a

book read; plant a rain garden; start a justice choir; advocate for mental health programs. Find your critical edge and dig in.

Friends, this is the work we have been doing together as a community throughout the entire Open Doors, Open Futures process. Through listening, discernment and prayer, we've been digging deep for years to better understand who we are and where God is leading us as a downtown congregation

In fact, in seeking to find our own critical edge, Westminster has set aside serious time in staff and session retreats to ask of God and one another this young lawyer's question - "who is our neighbor?" In the midst of our work and worship, we've spent years wresting and discerning questions about our gifts, resources, and partnerships, seeking to understand where God is calling us as a community.

By engaging these very questions, we are finding action in place of apathy, hope in the midst of despair, and the blessing of traction for our ministry even in our changing downtown context.

That's what the love of God and neighbor demands of us: find your place of calling, your critical edge, and dig in. It's as simple as that and as hard at.

So I leave us today with what became the guiding questions of our high school trip: In the continuum of apathy and action, where do you fall today?

What are your gifts? Who is your neighbor? Have you found your critical edge?

May God bless us with traction for lives and ministries. Amen.