

Matthew 9:35-10:23

June 18, 2017

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

Sign Me Up

John and I have ridden our bicycles across Iowa on three separate occasions. The yearly bike ride is called RAGBRAI. At the beginning of the ride, bicyclists dip their rear tires in the Missouri River on the west side of the state and at the end, riders dip their front tires in the Mississippi River on the east side of the state. And in between, there is beautiful scenery, radical Iowa welcome, pie made by church women raising money for important ministries, and so much fun.

The ride takes place each year during the last full week of July. Depending on the year's route, cyclists ride between 60 and 80 miles, each day, to the next overnight town. There are over 10,000 people who participate in the ride each year. In many ways, the ride is like spring break for grown-ups, although people of all ages ride, including families whose small children ride in those little bicycle trailer things. Following the first time we did the ride, in 2006, I couldn't wait to get home and tell people about it. I had this idea that if I told people about it, some of them might want to join us next time. We've since done the ride 2 other times and none of our friends and family have joined us!

Shortly after coming home, John and I had dinner with friends and we told them about our trip. Each day we got up before sunrise in order to get an early start due to the extreme temperatures expected every day. We waited in line each morning to use the portable restrooms. I learned quickly to take my own toilet paper with me. We brushed our teeth outside our tent, using the water from the water bottles we kept on our bikes. When we were all ready for the day, we began the process of taking down our tent and packing our gear.

The tents were always wet from morning dew. And it was hard to get things packed just right in the dark. We wanted to be on the road at first light. Some people left even earlier. Once on the road, there were hills and wind, and heat. We would stop at little towns that had prepared for months to entertain and feed 10,000 riders on their way through. And at every stop, there were lines for food and water, lines for bathrooms, and heat. RAGBRAI is the place I cultivated my love for rhubarb pie. You see, when you are riding 80 miles a day...you can eat pie everyday!

Upon arrival at each day's overnight stop, we would grab our gear from the truck and immediately lay out our tent so it could dry as it was always still wet from the morning. While it was drying, we would rehydrate, and talk with other riders about the ride. Then we would set up our tent, blow up the air mattresses, find clean clothes and wait in line for a shower.

We always tried to find an air-conditioned spot for dinner and then, as you might imagine, we would fall into bed and begin again the next day. One night, there was a horrible storm, complete with tornado sirens and stern warnings to take cover. We didn't need a storm shelter, though! Water poured into our tent. The air mattresses sort of turned into water slides. I remember looking at John and telling him I wanted to cry, but that I was pretty sure, after riding 80 miles in 95 degree heat, I couldn't spare the fluid.

As we told our friends the story of our adventure, they were horrified! They made comments like, "That does not sound like a vacation to me. Vacations are supposed to be fun. It sounds like torture." I was reminded of this as I read this week's scripture. Jesus, traveling from place to place, met many people and the passage tells us, he felt compassion for them. He was moved by what he had seen and took concrete action. He gave his disciples the authority to go and help

people as he had been helping them. He said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest." The disciples were the desperately needed laborers.

But then, Jesus described what the job would be like. And after hearing the description, we wonder, much like our friends wonder why we torture ourselves on RAGBRAI, why would anyone be willing to do this?

Jesus told the disciples never to accept payment, not to take extra things with them, and to rely on the hospitality of strangers. He told them they would be like sheep in the midst of wolves, they would be hated and persecuted, and have to flee to protect themselves. Well, sign me up!

Who would accept this job? In some respects, it reminds me of the television show, *Dirty Jobs with Mike Rowe*. Rowe visits jobsites to give his viewers a window into what it's like to do some of the worst jobs imaginable. Three of the jobs he has highlighted are, sewer inspector, snake wrangler, and shark suit tester. You have to wonder about people who sign themselves up for these things.

Nevertheless, the disciples, faced with a "dirty job", say yes. I have to believe the reason they said yes was they believed in Jesus' message and believed in the realm of God Jesus came to proclaim, and was asking them to proclaim as well, "...proclaim the good news. The kingdom of heaven has come near," he said. Jesus called his disciples into this work, knowing the way to share the message of God's rule, so that people would believe it, was through concrete demonstrations of God's caring...tending to people who were sick, tormented, outcast. And he knew there was too much work for him to do it alone.

The same is true for us today. Our calling is to make God's love believable. And this passage tells us that God's love is made real through the deliverance of the oppressed---curing the sick, bringing hope in the midst of despair, welcoming the outcast, and dispelling darkness. At this time, Jesus sent the disciples out to minister only to Jewish people. We are in a time and place where, like Jesus' followers later in Acts, we are called to proclaim the realm of God, not just to people like us, but to everyone.

For the Jewish people, everyone who wasn't Jewish, were in some respects, "the other." As I listened to Kay's message to us, I thought about the people in our community who are too often cast as "the other." People who are poor, homeless, old, young, people who have mental illness, people who believe things we don't believe. I read CONCERN's mission statement this week, "The mission of Churches United for Community is to provide compassionate support to individuals and families needing assistance through contributions of faith and civic organizations, generous individuals, corporate partners, and grants." There it is again...compassion. Compassion is feeling another person's pain and responding through action, to alleviate suffering. The stories of CONCERN remind us there is much work to do, but the harvest, is indeed plentiful. The work, the heartache, the risk...it's all worth it to make God's love believable.

When John and I talked to our friends about our vacation, we left out a few details, which may have helped them see that the hardships we endured were worth it. You see, bicycling was "our thing". We fell in love while riding our bikes together. We planned and trained for RAGBRAI for months. Before we even started the ride, we had ridden more than 600 miles together that year. We weren't completely aware of it at the time, while we were training and pedaling up hills and against the wind in the heat, but our rides together showed us how we

wanted to spend the rest of our lives. We knew we weren't going to be alone, in good times and bad, we would be together.

Jesus tells his disciples, in chapter 10, verse 20, that when they are forced to testify about him to the people in power, not to worry about what to say, "for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." In good times and in bad, Jesus' followers would not and will not be alone. That is the promise Jesus made then and that promise is ours too. The work is hard and heartbreaking and risky, but we don't do the work alone. We do it together, with our partners, and with the Spirit of God showing us the way.

Today we celebrate one of our core values: Justice through Service. We celebrate the work we have done together, and the work we will do together in the future. We celebrate all of the people who have made God's love believable to the clients at CONCERN and all of the places the body of Christ has shown up to ease suffering. And on this day, we celebrate the men who have demonstrated that real men show up with compassion and love for their families, friends, and "the least of these." For some of us these men are our grandfathers, fathers, uncles, and brothers. For others, they are our teachers, neighbors, coaches, scout leaders, and friends. To all of the men who show up with love in their hearts, encouraging, protecting, and making a place for others, we remember you and thank you today.

Justice through Service is an important part of the DNA of this church. We are a group of people who care deeply about Bartlesville, OK and the world. I read a lot about healthy churches and transformational ministry. One of the things I have read over and over is the importance of churches asking the question, "How would this community be different if our church didn't exist?" So, "How would Bartlesville be different if Disciples Christian Church didn't exist?" Let me tell you what I think.

If Disciples Christian Church didn't exist, Family Promise would not be helping families who are homeless put their lives back together. The Pelivan Circuit Bus would not be transporting our neighbors to and from work, doctor appointments and the grocery store. The Car Repair Fund would not exist. And that is just the tip of the iceberg. Bartlesville, specifically the most vulnerable people in Bartlesville, needs this church and our passion for justice.

We are so passionate for bringing about justice through compassionate service that one third of our church budget is devoted to that. One third...that's huge. As we look ahead to our ministry plan for 2018, I hope we can have some great conversations about how to engage this core value of justice through service even more intentionally...how we can focus our resources, together, to make the most impact. In the next week or so, many of us will be participating in small groups to talk about this core value. If you have not signed up for a group, let me know and I will put you in touch with a group leader. We really, really want your input as we put together the 2018 ministry plan for this church.

This work that God calls us to is life changing, community transforming work. It is worth our conversation, our intentionality, and our prayerful thoughtfulness. How is God calling us to use the resources we designate for justice and service? What is God calling us to individually and corporately? How are we being asked to commit to this work in 2018?

And speaking of commitment, I should tell you that at the end of RAGBRAI in 2006, after I dipped the back tire of my bike in the Mississippi River, John pulled a ring out of his bike pack and asked me to marry him. So, the answer to the question, "Why would anyone choose to spend their vacation riding across Iowa?", is "For love."

And the answer to the question, “Why would followers of Jesus choose to risk everything for the job Jesus calls them to?”, is “For love.” Amen.