

“Not a Nice Story”

Luke 10:1-11

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There are over fifty descriptions of Jesus in the New Testament portion of the Bible. He is called everything from the Almighty One and the Alpha and Omega, to the Word and the Way. Jesus is described as faithful and true, peace, an advocate, and our hope. There is one notable description that we often like to use for other people that is not used for Jesus: Jesus is never called nice. In fact, we often tell stories about him where he is arguing with people, calling people out on their poor behavior, and getting in trouble with authority. He is courageous, he is compassionate, he is outspoken – but he’s not really nice.

Nice has become a blanket statement for something we should strive for in all times, but more concretely being nice means being agreeable, civil, able to get along. It’s kind of bland, kind of boring, but is also something we lean into as a culture – we avoid conflict by being nice even when we want to shout and one of the first lessons we teach our children is to be nice to other people at any cost. Jesus is not kind of bland or boring, he’s not particularly agreeable or civil, and he is definitely not able to get along with all people. I say this with pride and not judgement: he’s not very nice.

I’m okay with Jesus not being nice. I am proud to follow someone who throws all the rules out, speaks out when he needs to, and who makes his own path. I think when the stakes are high – when justice is on the line, when the call is to eradicate suffering and oppression, when everlasting peace is more valued than a complacent peace – there are more important things to focus on than being nice. That makes sense to me.

However – and this is a big however - where I start to get a little uncomfortable is when I begin thinking about following someone who doesn't have niceness as a core value and the implications that might have on me and how I am supposed to show up in the world. I have been told my whole life to be nice – to my brothers, to my friends, to my enemies, to strangers on the street. I pride myself on getting along with almost everyone. I think bland and boring is a great thing to be if it means keeping out of trouble. So it's all fine and good for Jesus not to be very nice, but I always secretly hope that doesn't extend to me or anyone else who follows him. Christianity already has a complicated reputation – we don't need to add “not very nice” to the list.

A lot of time as Christians we are able to sidestep this dilemma by focusing on Jesus – on his actions, on his miracles, on the ways he stood up for outsiders and misfits. But then comes along a story like the one we read today, and it's clearly about who *we* are called to be and what *we* are called to do. And on first read, this does not look like a nice story.

Jesus brings together seventy disciples, pairs them off, and sends them out into towns and communities. He sends them to places that Jesus himself has not yet gone, so we can assume they are going to meet people who have never heard of Jesus and what he stands for or what he does. They are not able to bring anything with them or talk to anyone on the way. Jesus says he is sending them out like lambs in the midst of wolves which to be honest, sounds a little harsh.

These seventy disciples are supposed to show up in town, knock on someone's door and say, “I come in peace and wish nothing but peace for your house!” And if the person who answers welcomes you in, everything is great, you'll share a meal, you'll heal some folks, and all will be well.

But if you knock on someone's door and they don't respond by welcoming you into their home, you're supposed to go into the street and shout back at them, "Even the dust of your town that clings to my feet I wipe off in protest of you!" In other words: "I think so little of you that I wipe your dust off my feet." The thought of playing out any of this in my life makes me squirm because it is **so** not what we are taught to do. We don't intrude on strangers, and if we do, we don't yell at someone just because they disagree with us or don't invite us in for supper.

If we look at the instructions Jesus gave to the seventy through the lens of niceness as our primary way of being in the world and interacting with other people, it's wildly uncomfortable, and not many of us would feel called to the task. But Jesus gave these instructions looking through a different lens. His core reasoning in sending out the seventy disciples was to spread his message of justice. When you hear the story in this way, it becomes a very different task. Let's cast aside niceness and hear it again with this new lens of justice:

Jesus brought together seventy disciples, paired them off, and sent them into towns and communities. These were towns Jesus hadn't been before but intended to go. Jesus made a point of going where there was injustice so you can assume that in these towns there were people who were being excluded, being discriminated against, and or being subject to oppressive systems.

It would have been easy for the disciples to show up in these places and bring their own ideas about how to solve the problems they were to encounter. They could meet a man who was shunned because of a disease he had and they could say, "Oh that reminds me of a man with leprosy Jesus saved last year. I know just how to fix him!" But if they did that, they would be in danger of leaping to solutions instead of listening to what people were asking for, so Jesus told them to leave their baggage behind. And don't talk to people on the way – choose to listen instead.

Jesus says he is sending them out like lambs in the midst of wolves – which seems accurate because we know that the disciples are bringing God’s peace with them – a peace that calls on accountability, a peace that calls out corruption, a peace that unsettles greed and hypocrisy and evil. The wolves Jesus references are those people the disciples will encounter who will protect their profits and their personal wellbeing over justice at any cost.

So when the disciples show up, knock on someone’s door, and announce that they come in peace – people will know that it is God’s peace, this disruptive, unsettling, justice focused peace. And there will be some people who answer the door longing for that same peace. These will be people who have been most impacted by the corruption and greed and hypocrisy. These will be the people who have been told they are not good enough, not wealthy enough, not able enough. These will be the people who have suffered greatly under systems designed to harm them.

When the disciples offer peace and it is echoed back to them, they will know that they have found their people. They will know that God’s radical love and work for justice has already taken root. The disciples are then called to join these new folks – to eat what they are eating, to do what they do, to be in their house which means letting them take the lead. Jesus is calling his disciples to allyship – to listening for the needs, letting the people most impacted take the lead, and showing up in support and solidarity.

And when they encounter a place in the town where their word of God’s radically disruptive, justice-filled peace is not welcome? Well. That is where the struggle happens. Those are the people who are fighting to uphold the oppression of others. Who are clinging to systems that benefit the most wealthy or the most connected. Who are making excuses for the way things have always been.

When the disciples enter places like that, they are called to disown those systems. Challenge hatred and bigotry. Wipe the dust from their feet and disavow the kinds of evil that keep people separate and marginalized and harmed. Because that is what Jesus did – loudly and publically – and when he sends his disciples out before him, they are called to do the same. It isn't about being nice. It's about healing trauma. It isn't about being passive. It's about boldly claiming a new kind of love. It isn't about obediently following the laws of the land. It's about following their morality no matter where it takes them so that all people may be valued and cared for.

And as the disciples do this counter-cultural, uncomfortable, risk-taking, peacemaking work – they are called – we are called in turn – to bring the same message no matter what we encounter: the kingdom of God is near. If you are suffering, have hope, because God's kingdom of justice and righteousness is already at work in your midst. If you have been kept out at the borders, persist, because God's kingdom has already claimed you as a citizen. And if you have made others to suffer – if you have locked down your borders to keep others out – know this: God's kingdom is already at work in your midst, and there is nothing – not evil, not hatred, not even death – that can keep it away. It might not be nice, but it's the work of justice, it's the work of peace, it's the work of God's kingdom in our midst. It's the discipleship we are called to as followers of Jesus. Amen.