

You Can Lead A Horse to Water
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Psalm 29, Matthew 28:16-20

According to my sources 'You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink' is the oldest English proverb still in regular use today, recorded as early as 1175 in a book entitled Old English Homilies.¹

You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink.

So true. And so incredibly frustrating!

Because there are times in life where we see what another creature really needs to thrive, and we don't have control over making it happen.

Anyone who has ever had to sneak medicine into a pet's treats knows this.

Anyone who has ever had to bargain with their child to drink water at summer camp knows this.

Anyone who has ever seen a person stuck in cycles of addiction knows this.

Anyone who has ever seen blatant hate and racism, and wants to do something about it, knows this.

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.

But that doesn't mean you don't still try.

It doesn't mean you don't still try, to get the dog to take their medicine, or get the kid to drink their water.

It doesn't mean you don't still try, because you love the person struggling with an addiction and you don't ever stop wanting better for them.

And it doesn't mean you stop speaking love and inclusion into the world.

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to some of his disciples on a mountain. Some doubted, some believed fully. And he called each of them to baptize all nations, to make disciples and teach them to obey what Jesus taught.

¹ <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-origin-of-the-idiom-You-can-lead-the-horse-to-the-water-I-have-heard-it-in-more-than-one-language-What-part-of-the-world-does-it-originate>

We are here today because our ancestors in faith heard Jesus' call to "go" and they did. They went out into the world to live their faith: healing the sick, serving the poor, loving neighbors near and far. They went out to follow Jesus and to invite others alongside them. And something funny happened. More and more people kept joining in their movement. And here we are.

We are here because our ancestors left their comfortable places, with people that looked like them and talked like them. They didn't wait for others to come to them. That's something we tend to struggle with in our corner of the church... we tend to be more prepared for those who are looking for us, rather than asking where and to whom God calls US to go.

Jesus calls the disciples to help others become more like Jesus, not more like the disciples. This may seem like a small detail, but it makes a world of a difference. "*All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me,*" Jesus says. Not to us. It's not about us, needing to go show other people everything they are doing wrong so they can be more like us.

It is about learning together how to follow Christ. It is about believing that this following Jesus thing is so good, so important, so powerful that we want others to be part of that journey. Not for their volunteer hours or to get their money. Not to make them be like us.

To learn from one another. To grow together.

There are lots of ways to grow a church!

You can tell people they are wrong, and that they're going to hell. You can say the only way to joy in earth and on heaven is by coming and being part of us. You can target people as just one more soul to save.

Or, you can do what Jesus' disciples did. You can go out into the world, living your faith as best you are able. Growing with one another, building relationships of care and true concern, healing the sick, serving the poor, loving neighbors near and far. Not telling, but SHOWING the world what doing God's will looks like. Trusting that when we do, we will grow in spirit and faith, and maybe even some more "butts in the pews", be they virtual or in-person.

The Spirit works everything out, not necessarily how we might choose, with our limited human imaginations. According to God's good purposes, whatever they may be. After all, Jesus has promised. "*Lo, I will be with you always, to the end of the age.*"

I don't think this message stops with those 11 disciples, in fact, I know it doesn't. It continues to this day... making disciples, spread Jesus' love, remembering God is with us, that's our job.

But making disciples is hard work. Sometimes that's because you are trying to lead people to the water and they don't want to drink.

And if you know anything about horses (particularly untrained ones), you know that if you pull on a horse's harness, they will pull back. Which can immediately put you into a tug o' war with a creature who outweighs you at least 5 times over.

Good luck with that!

If we try just pulling people into following Jesus' commands, we can't be too surprised when they pull back. So instead, we have to journey alongside one another. And that can be much harder than it might seem.

Which requires patience, compassion, humility, and love.

It requires listening... asking questions to better understand one another. Not asking questions so that you now have more information to argue your point with, but so that you know where they're coming from.

Look at how Jesus made disciples. It was by no means easy. Sometimes he simply said "*come, follow me*" and people put down what they were doing and started following him. But then he seems to often say to the disciples, "*really, I have to explain all of this to you AGAIN!?*"

Jesus knew that he would not spread God's message of love far by himself. He knew that all the world needed to hear it and he knew that ONLY working as a team would make it happen.

So, what are these commands that need disciples to be spread?

Repeatedly, in the gospels, it is all about loving people, especially the poor, the outcast, the unheard, the marginalized.

It is about non-violent opposition to oppressive authorities.

It is about listening to one another.

There's a lot of hurt in our world today. Hurt that has been happening for centuries, such as domestic abuse and racial discrimination and hate crimes. Right now, we feel so much of that, on top of navigating some kind of pandemic recovery.

And I know, it can be exhausting when we feel we are trying, once again, to bring a loved one to the waters of justice and non-discrimination and equity. And, once again, they aren't budging. It doesn't mean we don't try again with them or with another individual. It just means we may not be able to force.

And so, right now, I encourage you to remember that Jesus is with us always. The Holy Spirit is connecting people and bringing people together: to stand for justice, to help provide for all, to truly see people who have been pushed to the margins.

The process isn't perfect. Not everyone we have a conversation with will "*see the light.*" Who knows - in some cases, we may be the person who needs to "*see the light.*"

And, yet, each small step taken toward spreading Jesus' commands is a step in the right direction.

And I wonder where God is calling you to go, me to go, us to go next?

Wherever it may be, may we have the courage and faithfulness to do our part, trusting that the journey is good, wherever it may lead. Amen.