

## Exit Strategy

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Luke 4:14-30

Comedian Steve Martin in his autobiography *Born Standing Up* tells of the time when he was early in his career performing at Vanderbilt University. The show took place in one of the university's classrooms and there were about a hundred students there to see him perform. When the act was over Steve Martin thanked them for coming and began to gather his props but he noticed that the audience had not begun to leave. They remained seated. They remained seated because they were not convinced the show was over. Martin said, "It's over." But they just kind of laughed because they thought this was just more of the act. "No, really," he said, "it's over." More laughter. Without any way to exit the classroom except to walk through the audience, Steve Martin began walking through the crowd adlibbing a little more comedy and the students thought it was great. And when he got to the door of the classroom hoping to leave they all got up to follow him. Again, thinking this was a part of the act. Steve Martin led them out of the classroom and then out of the building and they began walking across the campus; Martin adlibbing along the way. They came across a drained swimming pool, an empty swimming pool and Steve Martin said, "OK, everybody into the pool." So they all climbed into the empty pool and Steve Martin said, "OK you're the water and I'm the swimmer – and I am going to swim on top of you!" And the crowd

knew exactly what to do – they passed him hand over hand as he did the crawl across the pool. Steve Martin doesn't tell us how he ultimately brought that show to an end, but there is something to be said about a show that continues out the door.

I had that experience at an Off-Broadway show in New York City – Tony and Tina's Wedding. Performed in a church. When you arrive to the show you discover that you are one of the guests at a wedding – Tony and Tina's wedding – and you are treated as such. You are expected to act as a guest at this wedding. And you sit through a wedding ceremony – a comedic one of course. And when the wedding is over you are invited to the reception – and as a part of the show the audience is led out of the church and down 46th Street and across Ninth Ave. and over to where the reception is to take place at a local restaurant. A very strange experience to be an audience member exiting the church and parading down the clamor and chaos of 46th Street in midtown Manhattan. There is something to be said about a show that continues out the door.

I'm not sure it is what Jesus had in mind when he took his show – or should I say began his ministry – back in his hometown of Nazareth. The newly trained rabbi has come home to his home synagogue and they ask him to step forward and do the teaching – the preaching we would call it. And Jesus reads from the Hebrew scriptures from the Isaiah scroll where it says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Had the

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show ended there it might have ended all right. But then Jesus goes on to say to his hometown congregation that the truth is that what God might be up to might be more out there, than in here. That the show continues out the door. And he reminds them that in their scriptures there are these stories where God does amazing things in the lives of Gentiles – the widow at Zarephath and the Syrian leper. Guess what, Jesus suggests, God isn't bound to the walls of this theater. Guess what – the show continues out the door. And by this time the audience is not laughing – the audience is mad. They are mad because they want the show to say inside. They are mad because they want their religion to remain bound inside their walls. But Jesus says, "Outside!" And so they say, "We'll 'outside' you Jesus." And they grab him by the collar and drag him outside and they take him to the edge of town to a cliff with every idea of how to end this act – throw this joker off the ledge. But Jesus, according to Luke, passed his way through the crowd and made his way to the next town.

There is something to be said about a show that continues out the door.

And that of course is precisely where Jesus does most of his ministry – outside the door. Down at the edge of the sea. Over in the corners of town where the tax collectors and

sinners hang out. Up in the red-light district where the prostitutes do their thing. Down in the valley of the lepers – the untouchables. To all those folks not allowed in the synagogue. That's where Jesus takes his show.

So it should have been no surprise when after Jesus' resurrection the disciples were all huddled up inside some room – waiting for the promised Holy Spirit. It should have been no surprise that when the Spirit came it came as a wind ... wind and fire. And Luke tells us that it blew them right out the door. Because there is nothing like a show that continues out the door.

You know one of the great shifts that is taking place in our society today is that fewer and fewer people are inclined to step through those door and into here. Fewer and fewer people consider going to church an important thing. Fewer people are convinced that to find God you need to go into a church. When I grew up and you drove by a building with a steeple on top you called it "God's house". As children we wondered if that's where God lived. But we know better than that – we know that God lives in the world. God is active in the world. God is with the poor, the oppressed, the captives and the blind. God is doing God's thing out there.

Now don't get me wrong – God does God's thing in here too. The world needs sanctuary.

The world needs its holy places. The people of God need their gathering places of worship. The word must be preached. The glory of God must be expressed. The sacrament must be served. This is and always will be our beginning place. But there is nothing like a show that continues out the door.

Hundreds of you know this already. Those of you who walk out these doors and head over to the campus center and tutor a child or two. Those of you who walk out these doors and volunteer at the Food Pantry and hand out bags of groceries. Those of you who walk out these doors and travel to Honduras or Nicaragua on one of our mission trips. Those of you who walk out these doors and swing a hammer for Habitat for Humanity. Those of you – and God bless you for this – those of you who walked out these doors and showed up at the Hanukah service at Temple Sinai a couple weeks ago to show solidarity with our sister congregation who had been vandalized with anti-Semitic symbols. Those of you who walk out these doors and help us with the Day of Hope and caring for children as they get ready for school. Those of you who walk out these doors and spend the night with homeless families for Family Promise. There is nothing like a show that continues out the door.

[I'm sure that's what Deborah Little had in mind. Deborah Little is a woman I met a long time ago while on pilgrimage in Ireland. In mid-life she felt the call to pastoral ministry, went to seminary and prepared for ordination when one day she passed by a homeless person sitting on the stoop of her Boston apartment building and it dawned on her that she would never find this woman inside her church. And so she thought up all the reasons

why she shouldn't do ministry to people on the outside until finally the day when she said to herself – well let's just try it today. Maybe not tomorrow, but today. So she bought two cups of coffee and went to a nearby park and found a homeless man sitting on a bench. So she sat down with every butterfly in the universe fluttering in her stomach. She handed the man one of her cups of coffee and then just sat there and he said to her, "And so how are you today?" And that was the start of her ministry to people on the outside in what became something called Common Cathedral – a park ministry to homeless folks and their friends that started with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and made its way to bread and cup – and the gospel preached in deed and word. Said Deborah Little to me, "One thing I took from Jesus was that if you wanted to learn about God, hang out with poor people." There is nothing like a show that continues out the door.]

So in a few minutes we get to take this show out the door. We get to exit out our respective doors and make our way to the back 40 where will break ground for a place, a facility for people who may not be inclined to meet us in here. A center to help us meet people where they are. A place for families, youth and children – a place for older adults, baby boomers, you name it, people who are looking for some recreation, some hospitality, some fellowship -- for the wholeness of body, mind and spirit. People whom we can meet right where they are so as to introduce to them the one who meets all of us where we are – the one just born in Bethlehem – the one who leads the parade out of the synagogue and into all the corners of the world. The One who fills

this place with wind and fire and blows open the doors and looks to see the show continue outside these walls.

"Go!!" Jesus says. Not just to that building over there or that building over there. "Go to wherever the Spirit wants to blow you! Your neighborhood. Your workplace. Your family. God's children half across the world. "Go," he says. "Get out of here and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them all that I have commanded you. Go!" Jesus says, "because there is nothing like a show that continues out the door!"



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