

The Desired Result

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Luke 19:29-46

There are people in your life that you want for a relationship. And there are people in your life that you need for a result.

A while ago I had the chance to go to Chicago and meet up with a friend, my best friend actually, for a small window of time at conference that we were both attending. We were to meet one evening after dinner to catch up before the conference started. We were both to arrive in Chicago at around the same time. On the way to Chicago I of course had to drive to the airport, drop off my car, get on a plane, rent a car once in Chicago and then make my way to where we were going to meet. Now when you travel you are, of course, at the mercy of many, many people to execute effectively and efficiently their travel related services. Now getting to the airport and dropping off my car went fine. But once I got into the airport things started to go south. There was a line at the ID check point that moved very, very slowly. There was a line at the security gate that moved very, very slowly. But all that is fine as long as you make it to the gate on time, which I did. But when I got to the gate I learned that the plane was going to be delayed. Now when I am standing in a very slow line or waiting amidst an unexpected delay, it is interesting how I relate to the people who are attempting to provide service to me. I relate to them in respect to results. I am critical of them if those results seem less than adequate. I can even be less than polite if they are not performing for me the way I want them to. I do not care to have a relationship with them. I want only from them results.

Thus when I am standing at the rental car counter having arrived an hour and a half late into Chicago and the customer service representative is having

trouble getting her computer to work, it is not the first thought that comes to mind to ask if I can see pictures of her children. I am not interested in spending anymore time with her than what is absolutely necessary to get the keys in my hand and the contract printed. In fact I notice that I don't even look at her. I stare at her uncooperative computer monitor. And then I realize that it has been that way for the last six hours. Everyone with whom I have had contact I have spent very little time looking at. I have looked mostly at what we have exchanged; the products and the services, the tickets, the luggage, the coffee cup and the security monitor. But not the persons. I want from them results not relationship.

Now all that changes when I come rushing an hour and three quarters late into the lobby where my friend sits. Now my eyes are raised. My hand is out. My arms enfold him with a hug. And casually we go to find a place to get a drink. For the rest of the night as we talk into the wee hours and there is little notice of our watches, we don't pay much attention to the décor of the room, we don't even mind if the service is slow. I don't think to ask him about what he can do for me. I don't expect at the end of the night that he will hand me a product. I seek no result. It's all about the relationship.

There are people in your life you need for a relationship and there are people in your life you want for results.

Some of you will leave here and make your way to brunch, perhaps. And when the waiter comes to take your order maybe you will exchange in a little polite back and forth as he introduces himself and takes your order. What a nice young man, you might say. You might even care enough to ask him where he goes to school or about how long he has been working at the restaurant. But let's imagine he gets your order wrong. Let's imagine he forgets to get you your drinks. Let's imagine he screws up the bill. Let's imagine he spills some coffee on your lap. Let's imagine he loses your credit card. It is perhaps at this point, as your blood pressure rises and you ask to see the manager -- that the nature of the relationship is exposed -- you

need him for results -- not for relationship.

Now on the other hand, let's imagine you've invited some friends over for dinner and they ask what they can bring and you say, oh just bring yourselves. But they insist so you say bring an appetizer. So they come with some homemade bean dip. And you sit down and you put your cracker in the bean dip and you put it in your mouth and you quickly discover that it is the worst bean dip you have ever put in your mouth. It is all you can do to swallow this first little dab. Now what you know is that this little get together is not about the bean dip. It does not cross your mind to tell your guests that the bean dip was inadequate. You do not send them home to get a different appetizer. Because there is no desired result than to have these folks with you. In fact, you might even eat a few more crackers full of bean dip so as to make sure you don't offend your guests.

There are people in your life you desire for a relationship and there are people in your life you desire for results.

I wonder if there isn't a little bit of this happening when Jesus comes to town. It's Palm Sunday and Jesus is coming to town. The humble king riding into the city of Jerusalem on a donkey. Not a white charging stallion, as some would have expected in a Messiah, but a donkey. And the people are happy. They're happy because they've heard of all the results that he's produced throughout the Galilean and Judean countryside. Healings. Demon casting. Walking on water. This guy's got the goods. He may have even

raised a man from the dead as close as nearby Bethany. So they are in a good mood this crowd. They are willing to look past the jackass and turn their attention on the miracle worker, the magic performer. "Hosanna" is the word they yell as Jesus walks by. "Hosanna". It's Hebrew for "save us now." That's what they want Jesus to do upon his entry to Jerusalem, "save us now." They are happy he is here but they want results.

And right away Jesus delivers -- cleans out the temple. Chases out the money changers. My house is a house of prayer, not a house of transaction. And from there it's stories about the kingdom of God. Parables about the rich and the poor. Conversations with the Pharisees. Passover feasting with his friends. Oh, but you don't understand -- this is not what we ordered. This is not what we expected. We were looking for results.

God knows what they were looking for. Liberation from Rome. Get rich quick. Magic cure-all potion. The power of positive thinking. Lose 20 pounds in a week. God knows what they were looking for. But it's kind of been that way from the very beginning. This confusion over the relationship. This confusion as to whether it is a relationship.

Remember when Moses is leading the people through the wilderness and God has already spared them from the angel of death. Parted the Red Sea. Left Egypt in their rearview mirror. Given them manna and quail in the dessert. And then when Moses goes up the mountain to receive the law, the life-giving Law,

“The One who arrives in Bethlehem...is the One who will choose over and over again to be with us regardless of whether we pay any attention.”

the Exodus writer tells us, “When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us ...” We’re looking for results.

It’s tricky business this relationship of results. This transactional engagement. This quid pro quo deity. Makes for a pretty tenuous and fragile connection. Because you know life doesn’t always turn out the way we want it to turn out. You say your prayers, you do the right thing, you play by the rules, you don’t hurt anybody – and still it doesn’t always work out the way you ordered it. The plate before you is not what you wanted. Your next door neighbor says you just have to pray harder – then you’ll get what you wanted. The preacher on the TV says all you have to do is believe hard enough and gold will fall from heaven. But it doesn’t always work out that way.

Maybe that’s why Jesus is crying as he makes his way into the city. Luke says he wept over the city. Maybe Jesus sees what they want. Maybe Jesus sees that what they want is results. Quick fix. And that’s not what he has. What he has is himself. What he has is his life, his teaching, his love, his yearning for relationship. “You do not recognize the time of your visitation from God,” Jesus said, his eyes filled with tears.

And it might force us to go back to the beginning when back in December we sat here with our candles and we sang Silent Night, Holy Night – and what brought tears to our eyes was this visitation, this message from the angel that God was coming ... and that he was going to be with us and that he was going to save us from our sin. He was going to be with us and he was going to save us from our sin. And somehow that was enough. It was enough for him to visit, to be present, to love us, to save us from our sin. But even back then it took the angels of Bethlehem shouting from the heavens and pointing to the manger in the barn – “Look,” they said, “Look. There he is. The visit of God. The presence of God. The mercy of God. Don’t walk too fast, you’ll miss it.”

It makes me think of the end of Thornton Wilder’s

great play - *Our Town* - a play about life in a small fictional American town – Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire. It’s a story about the coming and goings of simple people in a simple town – which at first glance seem rather mundane and pedestrian. But it’s at the end when Emily Webb, a young woman having grown up in town and married her high school sweetheart and had her own child, tragically dies as a young mother. But she is given the chance to revisit a day in her life in Grover’s Corners. And so she visits her twelfth birthday and she sees the comings and goings of her mother and father and brother and the neighbors and the schoolmates. At first she is so happy to see these people again in their simple mundane passings – but then she painfully observes that no one is really paying attention. No one is really noticing each other. No one is really looking at one another. It’s all there, the beauty and wonder of life – but no one seems to have time to notice.

Says Emily to the Stage Manager: I can’t. I can’t go on. It goes so fast. We don’t have time to look at one another. I didn’t realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed.

Jesus weeps over the city and says, “You’re missing it. You’re missing the visit.” And later he will say, “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they’re doing. It’s going too fast for them, they don’t have time to notice. They just don’t see.” But that’s of course the good news. The one who arrives in Bethlehem, and walks the shore of Galilee, and descends the Mount of Olives, and rearranges the furniture in the temple and prays drops of blood in Gethsemane and mounts the cross of Calvary, and walks from his tomb – is the One who will choose over and over again to be with us regardless of whether we pay any attention. The One who will choose to forgive us over and over again because he knows that we do not know what we are doing.

“In this is love,” writes the apostle – “not that we loved God, not that we paid much attention to God, not that we noticed God, but that God loved us and sent his son ...”

And so I think of Sam. That’s what I’ll call him. Sam. Sam was one of the saints in one of my previous churches and his dear wife of many, many years – I’ll call her Mary -- fell victim to Alzheimer’s. Little by little Sam lost the love of his life to her own forgetful world. Until the point that he she no longer knew who he was. (Many of you have lived this story.) Sam kept her at home for as long as he could. She accompanied him on errands and attended meetings with him that he needed to go to. Sam would take her on drives through the countryside on Sunday afternoons. All this for someone who didn’t know who he was. And the picture that will never leave my mind is a composite picture of the times when I would walk past our sanctuary and hear the organ playing. And more often than not during that stretch of years, I knew it was Sam. Sam played the organ. And I’d peak through the back door of the sanctuary and there would be Mary sitting in the choir loft and there Sam would be playing the organ – for no one other than her. His audience of one. Even though she did not know, could not know, the love behind the keys.

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent his son. Riding on his donkey. Tears in his eyes. All because we did not know, could not know, the love amidst the palms.



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Church of the Palms

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