

Welcome
Luke 10: 1-11
Galatians 6: 7-16

We follow the Gospel lesson this morning with another lesson, one from two very different areas – medicine and auto racing. Let me share with you an account I read this past week.

In the operating room at Great Ormond Street Hospital in London, a three-year-old boy lies on a table with his chest open while surgeons work to correct a potentially fatal genetic defect in his heart. As a pair of surgeons begin closing the boy's chest after a successful operation, another doctor begins preparing for what may be the most delicate and dangerous part of the procedure – the “handoff” of the patient from the operating table to the ICU, which involves disconnecting and reconnecting tubes and wires, passing on information, preparing for contingencies, and transferring care of the patient from one medical team to another.

It's choreography with a sense of urgency – a medical minuet where one small misstep could have disastrous consequences.

A little more than a decade ago, those consequences were often tragically realized due to a lack of standardized handoff procedures. Between 1987 and 1993, pediatric cardiologist Dr. Marc de Leval performed 104 “arterial switch” operations at Great Ormond Street – an operation designed to correct a congenital heart defect in infants within the first two weeks of life. In one tragic spate, Dr. de Leval had seven of his tiny patients die in quick succession even though the operations had been successful.

In 1994 Dr. de Leval published a paper exploring what went wrong. The deaths could not all be attributed to the riskiness of the procedure or the failure of a machine. Rather, de Laval determined that it was the general “suboptimal performance” by himself and his team...particularly the “handoff” between the surgical and ICU teams.

Then one Sunday in 2003, after a particularly trying day in the operating room, the pediatric ICU chief at Great Ormond, Dr. Goldman, and surgeon Martin Elliott slumped on a couch in the break room and switched on a Formula One auto race. Both doctors were

fans of the sport, where precision machines race at high speed with the help of a team of technicians and an efficient pit crew. Watching the race that day, Goldman and Elliott realized that seeing a 20-man pit crew change four tires, fill the gas tank, adjust the air foils, and clean the filters in less than seven seconds made their hospital staff look like shade tree mechanics in comparison. They were inspired.

They invited members of McClaren, the British racing team, to come and share with them some of their procedures for making the teamwork run more efficiently. The big learning for them was that pit crews are obsessed with recording tiny mistakes and correcting them – the same conclusion that de Laval had come to years earlier.

In 2005, Goldman and Elliott visited the Ferrari racing headquarters in Italy to learn racing crew handoff techniques. On a Ferrari pit crew, every man has a specific job, done precisely in a specific sequence all without saying a word. The hospital team, by contrast, was noisy, confused and unfocused. No one and everyone seemed to be in charge at once. Their overall conclusion was this: **while big mistakes cause big problems, it's more often the small, unnoticed and uncorrected mistakes by medical teams that add up and correlate strongly to bad outcomes for patients.** It may mean the difference between life and death.

Needless to say, changes were made at Great Ormond Hospital. (Haphazard 21-2)

The welcome in a church on a Sunday morning is very much like a handoff. Certainly we do not operate like a well-oiled machine, nor do we make a point of not speaking; just the opposite. But – the result of a haphazard handoff in church might be very similar to what the Great Ormond doctors discovered: small, unnoticed and uncorrected mistakes by the team can add up to bad outcomes for parishioners.

Each one of you, whether a regular attendee or a first-time visitor, has come to church this morning on purpose, for a reason - to be healed of some brokenness; to be supported in the community of faith; to connect to God through prayer; to sing; even, perhaps, just to be here in this sanctuary. How we handle one another is extremely important. Here, too, it's the

small things that add up: the smile and the greeting from an usher; a bulletin that leads easily through the service; the sincerity in the passing of the peace; the spirit of the music; the friendliness of the fellowship time; the feel of the place at the hour of worship – compassionate, loving and holy. Little things, but how important.

Let's return to the lesson from Luke's gospel. Jesus has accomplished a handoff. He has commissioned a second wave of disciples – seventy of them – to spread the word that the kingdom of God has come near. How they handle the handoff is very important.

He told them to go in pairs; it would be dangerous – *See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.* He told them they would be completely dependent on the hospitality of other people – *Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals...eat and drink whatever they provide.*

He told them what to say – *Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!'* And he told them what might happen – the people might welcome the disciples or they might not. If they do, stay and heal. If they don't, leave. But whichever it is, proclaim this: *the kingdom of God has come near.*

The handoff that Jesus orchestrated for those seventy was simply and clearly organized.

Now imagine that one of these seventy came here, to Peapack Reformed. As the church, we think of ourselves as the body of Christ, which we are. Yet, Christ as another, Christ in another, may also come to us. . I am reminded of the verse from Hebrews 13: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.* (Heb. 13:2) But Christ may come not only as a stranger

or a visitor. On any given Sunday, someone we see week in and week out may be that disciple of Christ. How we welcome one another – how we handle one another – is extremely important. It may be the difference between life and death.

It all comes down to one idea though – we handle each other remembering that each of us is a sinner loved by God; remembering that God so loved the world that he sent his Son Jesus Christ into the world to save us from sin. That is what we are to keep uppermost in our attitude and conduct toward one another. Paul said it in his letter to the Galatians, the part Alden read: circumcised or not – Jew by birth or not – *May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...a new creation is everything!*

And Jesus sent those seventy to every town with the exact same message for those who would welcome them and those who would not: *the kingdom of God has come near.* The proclamation of the Word of God and the living of it – that’s what we are all here for.

An article in the latest issue of *Presbyterians Today*, entitled “Dusting off the welcome mat,” talked about why potential visitors do or do not decide to come to a church for the first time or what makes them return if they have visited. Most of these decisions are based on small factors – an attractive, up-to-date website, for example, or a pleasant voice delivering a simple message on an answering machine, a well-cared for physical facility. I liked the section called “Too much/too little attention”: “You had me at hello. Actually, you didn’t. Why? Because nobody said ‘hello.’ If you’re going to shove a bulletin in my hand, please make eye contact. I need you to

know I'm here, and I also need to know you want me to come back. On the other hand, don't make me stand up in worship. A hundred people in the church all turning to stare at me changes worship into a vague approximation of 'The Price is Right' with the host yelling, 'Come on down!'"

But even this lightly written article comes to the real conclusion. The author writes: "And did I mention Jesus? Because if your congregation is not 100-per cent about Jesus, then none of the other stuff is going to matter. And that's the gospel truth." (Maul 26-7)

We have to be careful how we handle one another and we need to remember how God, through Jesus Christ, has handled us - with grace and love. Amen.

"Haphazard Handoffs." *Homiletics*. July 2007: 21-25.

Maul, Derek. "Dusting off the welcome mat." *Presbyterians Today*. July/Aug. 2007: 24-27.

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