

“WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?”
II – THE RIPPLE EFFECT
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I Thessalonians 1:1-7

John 4:5-29

I told you recently about a trip I took with some others in August up to New York – to the areas in and around the town where I was born, Johnson City. We had a great few days up there, visiting my favorite giraffes (remember April, the giraffe the whole world waited for months to watch give birth – well, that's the one, and her sweet baby Tajiri, and his father Oliver), and we also spent a day over in Ithaca, my mother's hometown, where I showed my fellow travelers around. I showed them Ithaca College, from which my father graduated, we went up to Cornell University, finding (unfortunately too late) that it was move-in day for the students, then I showed them beautiful Stewart Park on the banks of Cayuga Lake, and then we drove up the west side of the lake to see the sights. I showed them Taughannock Falls, some of the tallest falls on the east coast, and then just down the road from there, I showed them the gravel road that led down to the cottage where we spent most of our summer vacations as a family.

My aunt and uncle had a wonderful little cottage on the banks of Cayuga Lake. It was and still is pretty rustic. Actually, back in the day when we first

started going there, they only had an outhouse. But there is a small front porch, a dining room, kitchen and small family room on the first floor, and then two bedrooms and a bathroom on the second floor. And we managed to squeeze eight of us into that little cottage for a week at a time on our vacations.

We loved every minute of it. The water in Cayuga Lake is ice cold until about mid-August and then it's just "take your breath away cold" when you first get in. We thought it was so cool to take a bath in the lake, and even wash our hair in the lake and watch the suds go floating away. We would spend our days swimming and rowing the boat and fishing, and nights sitting around the fire telling stories and at least once during the week making s'mores.

And of course we would play games. And as you probably remember, our family is very competitive when it comes to games. That goes for board games or any kind of challenges, which, at the lake, include rock-skipping challenges – who could get their rock to skip across the water the most times without going under. It takes some skill, not just in throwing, but in picking the perfect rock. Luckily there are lots and lots of flat rocks on the shores of Cayuga Lake.

I thought about those rocks when I read an article this week written by a man who was reminiscing about skipping rocks too. He said he loved to do that, but one day when he tired of skipping rocks, he just picked up a small rock and decided to see how far out he could throw it. He reached back and threw with all his might, and then, he says, he was amazed “at the way a relatively small splash could create ripples that would continue moving away from the center of impact until they reached the bank. I expected the ripples (he continued) to last only a few feet from the splash, but, to my wonder, they just kept going. They refused to die. Albeit small, they continued their swelling roll until they reached land. (And so) I learned that a small splash began something that took on a life of its own and could make an impact far away.” (On-line, “The Ripple Effect of Prayer,” preaching.com)

Of course, we’ve come to call that the ripple effect, and in both of today’s scripture readings, we see that happening. Why, in some of the very first words of the Epistle lesson, Paul writes about it to the Thessalonians. He spoke about it in terms of how the people of Thessalonica had imitated he and his fellow workers for Christ. The ripples from the pebbles of faith thrown by Paul and his compatriots touched the Thessalonians and they kept the ripples going by throwing pebbles of faith of their own. And as they did, that young church grew and grew by leaps and bounds. Their witness poured into other lives, touching them and changing them, and drawing them to Jesus.

In the Gospel lesson, it was a woman whose life was changed by an encounter with Christ who threw her pebble of faith, if you will, when, as the scripture says, she left his presence and went and told anyone who would listen what Jesus had done for her – and as a result others came to him too.

The ripple effect is a powerful thing when it comes to sharing faith in Jesus Christ. There is nothing like a person's witness or a person's act of love or charity, or a person's act of forgiveness to start a ripple flowing to others with the love of Christ.

And that's what we're called to do – to live our faith, to speak our faith, to share our faith in such a way that others will want to know the love of Christ that we know. We're called to cast the pebbles of our faith so that others will come to know the saving love of Jesus Christ.

One of the ways we cast pebbles of faith is through acts of kindness and compassion. Since we're giving a nod to Mr. Rogers in this sermon series, let me tell you what he had to say about that. "Imagine what our neighborhoods would be like

(he wrote) if each of us offered, as a matter of course, just one kind word to another person. There have been so many stories about the lack of courtesy, the impatience of today's world, road rage and even restaurant rage. Sometimes, all it takes is one kind word to nourish another person. Think of the ripple effect that can be created when we nourish someone. One kind empathetic word has a wonderful way of turning into many." (Fred Rogers, *The World According to Mister Rogers*, p. 185)

And remember that was written probably decades ago. How much more our world needs to hear kind words today, and how much more impact could our kind words have in this day and age, when there is so much bitterness and ugliness?

Jesus had a kind word to say to everyone who crossed his path, and so should we, as his followers. It's a gift we can give to a hurting world, and it's a pebble of faith we can throw via our words, that has the power to ripple over others to hopefully bless them, and compel them to do likewise.

So first, we can share our faith through words, but most assuredly, we can share our faith through acts as well. I read a story years and years ago that I've never forget about the power of a single act. It was the story of a man named

Toyohiko Kagawa, who was a very well-known Japanese pastor and poet. He was born a Buddhist but later became a Christian and he had a passion for caring for the poor. He became a sort-of Mother Teresa, becoming well known for his ministry with the poor, and thus was invited to speak in places all over the globe.

One day he was at a global gathering of Christians from around the world at which he had been invited to offer the keynote address. So he was a big deal, and attracted large crowds. Well, before he was scheduled to speak, on the way back from lunch, he and some of the others stopped by the restroom. As the group was leaving and making their way down the hallway toward the convention space, they noticed that Kagawa was not with them. Worried, they turned back and when they re-entered the restroom they saw Mr. Kagawa down on his knees picking up the towels that they had carelessly thrown at the wastebasket but missed, leaving them on the floor. When he finished cleaning them up, he stood up and rejoined his colleagues without saying a word. He didn't have to – his humility and simple act of care and consideration for others spoke volumes. (Michael Williams, *Friends for Life*, p. 110)

Don't you know that none of those men probably ever again was careless about throwing away towels, or anything else for that matter, and never forgot what

that great man did with humble care? The ripple effect. What we do, how we live, how we act, can touch others and compel them to goodness, even greatness, but more than that, can put them in touch with the One greatest, but most humble of all, Jesus the Christ.

So, we can share faith through our words, and we can share faith through our actions, but one of the most powerful pebbles of faith we can throw into the world is forgiveness.

I was reminded again this week of one man's pebble of faith shown through forgiveness that literally changed millions of lives. His name was Nelson Mandela. I know you know that Nelson Mandela was jailed for 27 years because of his fight against apartheid in South Africa. He suffered in so many ways over that. He had every right to be angry and bitter. Instead, Mandela chose a better way – the way of Christ.

Here's what he did. He really, truly believed that things could be different in South Africa, but he knew he couldn't change things alone. So, as one author put it, "he began building that nation from his cell." He knew that to make it happen

blacks and whites would have to work together, and so, he began to learn more about the white Afrikaners. He learned their language, and began slowly and surely to develop relationships with the Afrikaner prison guards. When he and fellow prisoners set up schools in the prison to teach one another, he insisted that the guards be welcomed too.

And a funny thing happened over time. They realized they had things in common, not the least of which was a common love for their country. And even though they still disagreed about many things, because they were spending time together and looking each other in the eyes and talking with each other, they stopped demonizing each other, and slowly, ever so slowly, became not an “us and them” but “we.”

When Mandela saw that happening in the prison, he knew it could happen on a larger scale. As one writer put it, “What had begun as an idea – that we must always view enemies as future friends and treat them as if that day of friendship had already arrived – what had begun as just an idea became a conviction that would shape him and shape history. Ripple effects that burst the walls of that prison even before Mandela did. Ripple effects that led to a nearly bloodless revolution that nobody believed could ever happen. Ripple effects that led to an

inauguration where his former jailers stood by him as Nelson Mandela ascended to the presidency of that one South Africa – black and white. Once enemies were now friends, because Mandela refused to wait to treat them any other way.” (On-line, “Ripple Effects,” The Very Rev. Mike Kinman, Christ Church Cathedral, 9/11/11)

Treating enemies as future friends, treating enemies with dignity, living forgiveness in a very real way was Nelson Mandela’s tossing pebbles of faith into the world, and look at what happened. The ripples touched millions of others and a new world was born.

And isn’t that what it’s all about in the end, for all of us – through Christ, to help bring a new world into being – a world of love, a world of peace, of compassion? We do that when we cast our pebbles of faith – through our words, our actions, our forgiveness, our witness to Christ and his love.

Someone once said, “If you had the cure to cancer, wouldn’t you do anything possible to tell people about it, to get the word out?” Well, friends, we have the answer to all of life’s ills, all of life’s longings, all of life’s needs and wants – and his

name is Jesus. Shouldn't we do everything possible to tell people about him – to cast our pebbles of faith into our hurting world – in any way we can?

Friends, may we go forth from this place today truly believing in the ripple effect – that what we say and do in the name of Christ can make a difference in the lives of others, and can indeed, help bring about the Kingdom of God on earth – here and now! May we go forth from this place and cast pebbles of faith in whatever ways we can, because indeed, as the hymn we're about to sing reminds us, "It only takes a spark to get a fire going!"

Be the spark, throw pebbles with wild abandon, share Christ with a hurting world! May it be so!

Amen.