

“How to Walk in The City”
2 Corinthians 3:12-19
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Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is home to one of the eleven seminaries in our denomination and for over two hundred years Pittsburgh Theological Seminary has been training some of the greatest theological minds of our denomination. People like Mr. Rogers, class of 62; Patrick Day, class of 95.

Now Pittsburgh Seminary is located in the East Liberty neighborhood of Pittsburgh....a neighborhood that for at least the last couple of decades has been one of the roughest neighborhoods in the city. East Liberty was one of the neighborhoods on which an 80's television crime drama - Hill Street Blues - was based.

I did my field education work at Liberty East Presbyterian Church. I began on a Sunday. The Tuesday before that Sunday someone had been murdered on the steps of the church in a drive-by shooting. To sum it up, it was the kind of neighborhood that, when my dad helped me move in, he said as he was preparing to leave, “I don't think we're going to tell your mother where you live.”

Now when I first moved there, I was talking to an upper classman and getting to know that person. He asked, “Where are you from?” I said, “I am from a little town in North Carolina.” He said, “Oh really, well you need to learn how to walk in the city,” and this is what he told me.

He told me that when you are walking down the sidewalk, you want to keep a little bit of distance between you and the buildings. See, that way if you are walking and you are coming to an alley you can see if there's anybody there. If you walk too close to the building, by the time you step into the alley, they can grab you. He said, “So keep some distance so that way you can see what's around that corner.”

The other thing he told me is, “When you are walking down the street, don't look down. If you look down, people will know you are afraid. So, as you're walking down the street, you want to make eye contact with the people who are walking the other way. This does two things: one, it portrays a sense of confidence and two, if you need to identify that person in a lineup you can.”

So, I learned these and I took them to heart and I gave distance to the buildings and I looked at people just enough - not too much that I was going to start trouble - just enough.

One night I was walking home from church. It was kind of late and I was doing all the right things. I had the space between the alleys; I was looking people in the eyes; doing everything just as I had been told. As I was walking I was thinking that I didn't have anything to eat for breakfast in my apartment so I thought I'd stop in this little gas station/convenience store for some Doritos and Mountain Dew. I walked in and saw this guy putting gas in his car. I

walked into the store and got my stuff. I took it up to the counter and got in line. I saw the same guy walking into the store who had been pumping gas. He had a five-dollar bill in his hand. I made an assumption.

I figured the guy was just putting gas in his car and he was in the store and he already had a five-dollar bill out; so I guessed that he put five dollars worth of gas in his car. So I looked at him and I said, “You know, you can go ahead of me.” “No, its all right, you were here first. You go!” I paid. I walked out and as I was walking in the parking lot I heard footsteps behind me. I stepped up the pace a little bit, and so did the footsteps behind me. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder and I spun around and it was the same guy. He looked at me and he sais, “Thanks for offering.”

This may not be the most dramatic conclusion of the story but I can tell you I will remember it for the rest of my life. See, the words that he said to me were thanks for offering but it told me a whole lot more. What it told me was this. You know this is a rough neighborhood, but don’t spend so much time guarding yourself from everything that you miss the beauty that can be found here, and it really changed me.

I began shopping the stores in that neighborhood; I began eating in the restaurants in that neighborhood; I began chatting with the street vendors on the sidewalk. It changed me!

You see, we are called to grow. The world wants us to grow. The world causes us to grow and be successful but if we grow as the world calls us to grow what ends up happening is that we begin looking at the people around us as competition or as a danger. We begin isolating ourselves from other people because we grow for ourselves. We put that veil on so we won’t get hurt.

This is not what God calls us to do. God calls us to grow, but we are to grow closer to each other and with each other. So often we are taught to interact with other people and be polite. A lot of times it stops there and it doesn’t go any further.

I want you to do something with me. I want you to take a minute and think of somebody you know. Think of a specific person. Not someone who is your best friend, not your worst enemy, but someone you know like another student who is in your class, a coworker, someone who lives down the street. Think about what you say to that person when you see them. What would you say? “Good morning. What’s up? How are you doing?”

What would you do if that person actually answered? “Oh my gosh, I’m so glad you asked. I feel like I haven’t talked to anybody in weeks and my life is falling apart. I need a shoulder to lean on. Thank you so much. Can you sit down with me?” Whoa.....! I say, “How are you doing?” and you say, “Fine,” and then we go separate ways.

When I was in seminary there was this student that no conversation with this student lasted less than one-half hour. One day I was walking down the hall and I saw this person coming toward me. I looked around and I was the only other person walking in this direction.

There was no escape and so I walked toward her and she walked toward me. Just as she was about to say something, I dropped my books. So, I bent down to pick up my books and she walked past me. I was free and clear!

Now let's review. I was studying to be a minister. I threw my books on the floor so I didn't have to talk to somebody. That is not how God calls us to live. See, through Christ we are made new. Through the radiance of God that radiance has been shared with us and we no longer need these things that guard us from one another. Because we have this hope through Christ, we can act with great boldness. That is what 2Corinthians verse 12 says; because we have this hope, we can act with great boldness.

Now, how is this bold for me to say, "How are you doing?" to somebody and actually listen to their answer? I think it is very bold. I have had a similar conversation in every church that I have served where someone will say to me, "You know I'd really like to be friendly and greet someone and say thank you for coming today and I hope you come back next Sunday. But I know that as soon as I do it that person is going to turn to me and say thank you for welcoming me as a visitor but I have been a member here for 15 years and I've been Clerk of Session for the past 8 years and I sang a solo at Christmas Eve last year." So, they don't do it.

How is it bold? Let me tell you. There was a church where the Board of Deacons divided the congregation into neighborhoods and each deacon took responsibility for a neighborhood. They made sure to send birthday cards, announcements, share information, reach out to a person in need.

These deacons decided one time to have Neighborhood Sunday. They said, "It will be great. We will invite everyone to sit with their neighborhood so they can draw that deeper connection." They went hog wild. They sent out letters, made phone calls, laid out the sanctuary by neighborhoods and numbered them.

You know what? It went over like a lead balloon.

You know why? Because I sit *here*. I know I am in neighborhood number 1 but, you see, I sit here. I couldn't possibly sit with my neighborhood because I sit here.

It is a bold act to reach out, to truly engage other people and it is what Christ calls us to do. It's how we are called to live because when we remove those veils, when we act with boldness, we see the radiance of Christ in other people. The radiance that Christ has shared with us is shown to other people. When we do that, these family traits and family values that Christine has been talking about become a part of who we are. We carry them with us; we share them with other people. We proclaim Christ's message. Let us share that hope that can be found in Christ. Amen.