

*“Are We His Type?”*

*Luke 9:51-62*

*June 30, 2013*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

*Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor*

Romantic and life-partner matches made by websites have gone from a curiosity to a force to be reckoned with in a decade. Approximately ¼ of the couples I now marry have met through a dating or matching website. The matching process typically involves determining areas of common interest or affinity, traditionally expressed as “*Are you their ‘type?’*”

Some of these websites actually reject potential customers. Consider the case of the tall, blue-eyed, 25 year old single actor who makes terrific calamari, enjoys sentimental movies and always remembers birthdays. Yet when he finished completing the personality test required by eHarmony.com, he was rejected.

“*I was stunned,*” the actor told *The Wall Street Journal*. He assumed an on-line dating service virtually guaranteed you a match. In fact, eHarmony rejects, by its own admission, about 20% of applicants, for reasons that make sense (being married) to reasons that don’t (being gay or lesbian). The count a decade ago was nearly 80,000 rejections according to Jane Spencer in the same *WSJ* article (July 30, 2003).

Knowing and remembering the pain of rejection—for few have not been rejected, whether in romance or some other life experience—may give us a visceral appreciation of Jesus’ challenge in today’s Gospel. It begs the question “*Are We His Type?*”

Jesus lets us know that, at times, following him is neither easy nor safe. The disciplined devotion he calls for is at odds with our cultural notion that everyone should be welcomed on whatever terms they desire. How do we reconcile Jesus’ stringent words today with other statements of his that are more permissive, welcoming prostitutes and tax collectors, people of different racial and cultural groups, the sick, and soldiers of the Roman army: all “unclean” by the orthodox Jewish

standards of his day? In fact, how do we reconcile his words with “*Whoever you are, wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here,*” a slogan of our church?

In his book The Tipping Point, Malcolm Gladwell makes the point that little things can make a big difference in social and institutional change. If you don’t believe little things make a big difference, consider the man who had an on-again, off-again toothache for nearly eight months. He’d had a cap put on and it wasn’t quite right. He’d gone back to have it ground down a little more and, although it still wasn’t quite right, he figured he could “live with it.” It wasn’t so bad at first. But recently it bothered him more and more, being like a toothache almost every day for several weeks. Finally, he went to the dentist and explained the problem. Before the dentist took x-rays the patient said, “*You know, doc, that cap never quite fit right. I wonder if it is that.*”

“*It absolutely could be,*” replied the dentist. He continued: “*Teeth are very sensitive and sensitive to their space. Your jaw muscles exert hundreds of pounds of pressure on the teeth. If a point is high, that concentrates the pressure to thousands of pounds.*” The dentist then ground the cap once more and the pain was gone! “*How much did you grind off?*” asked the patient. “*1/10 of a millimeter*” replied the dentist. I looked it up. It’s about the thickness of a piece of copy paper. Who was the man in the dentist chair? You’re looking at him!

So following Jesus is not always about high drama. Little things can make a big difference. We may not always see the results as instantaneously as I did last Thursday. But as many a spouse has said to their partner, “*It’s the little things that tell me you love me.*”

Gladwell also talks about “The Power of Context.” To understand Jesus’ demands we must understand their context. The Samaritans reject Jesus because of who he is and where he is going. Jesus was a Jew and Samaritans hated Jews owing to centuries of racial and political enmity. Samaritans inter-married their Assyrian conquerors between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century, B.C. while Jews maintained racial and political purity. Samaritans and Jews also had different holy places. For Jews, it was and

is Jerusalem. For Samaritans, it was Mount Gerizim. For the Samaritans, then, it was as though Jesus—headed to Jerusalem—was headed to Yankee Stadium with a Red Sox hat and a “Red Sox Nation” T-shirt. To the Samaritans, Jesus was going the wrong way.

Sometimes we struggle with that, don't we? We want peace but Jesus tells us to love our enemies. We want comfort but Jesus tells us to show hospitality to strangers. We want “what's mine is mine and yours is negotiable” but Jesus tells us “if you have two coats, give one away.”

So what is the context of Jesus hard statements in today's story? To the one who promises to follow “wherever,” Jesus reminds that permanency of home are not guaranteed. For Methodist preachers it is an itinerant ministry. Others, blessed by stable homes, are called to domestic and international mission service. Still others stay exactly where they are, but speak the Gospel word which challenges and agitates their neighbors, just as our Lord did. Following means risk!

To the one who desires to bury his father, Jesus emphasized the urgency of the message and the brevity of time. “Setting his face to Jerusalem” meant he was committed to his message even if it meant death. As a devout Jew he would surely have embraced the duty and its sacred honoring of the Fourth Commandment. But Jesus clearly places the proclamation of God's kingdom and kingdom building first.

To the one who desires to bid farewell, Jesus calls for forward thinking and forward progress: “*No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.*” Jesus is not condemning hospitality or manners, but rather an ability to move forward because of an ability to focus forward. You have to see where you are going.

While I am a generation removed from the farm, I have stood behind a plow, its blade cutting through rich earth to prepare furrows for planting the string beans that came in, at harvest time, by the bag full. Jesus' statement is true: if you look back while pushing the plow, your furrows will be crooked and you may disturb crops already planted.

So how do we become Jesus' type? The question presumes we want to which, I trust, is the true heart of Christians. So we become his type by sharing his determination to build God's kingdom. This is reflected in many ways today: baptism, study and commitment through the "God and Church" program and school graduations; mission outreach like the "Safe Water Project" and service to the larger church. The list is representative but not exhaustive. Two meetings this week—of the Long Range Planning Committee and the Gay-Straight Alliance—considered ways we can advance the ministry of this Church and the Kingdom of God. Becoming Jesus' type, as in most match-making, is sharing a common vision and goal and hope for life.

This means we also become Jesus type by getting to know him. It is one thing to know *about* Jesus and another to *know* him. I can tell you quite a bit about Jesus. But if that was all I had, I wouldn't be standing here. And I'm here to tell you that I know Jesus: a Savior who has redeemed this sinner; who keeps after me as the Hound of Heaven; who sometimes wakes me up in the middle of the night to pray for my people (that's you, if you're wondering); and who is determined to use me, with all my foibles and finitude, to be his servant. Knowing this Jesus sometimes is a fearsome thing but most often it is a wonderful, joyful, life-giving, liberating gift from heaven to earth.

Some will suggest I have these in the reverse order: know Jesus, and we will be inspired to build his Kingdom. For some that is so. For others, it is the action that leads us to the Actor. John Wesley, in a desert period in his faith, was counseled by his friend Peter Boehler: "*John, preach faith until you have it. Then, because you have it, you will preach it.*" For some of us it is the act of kingdom building that leads us to ask "Who is this king for whom we build?" and we find in him not only a Sovereign but a Savior; not only a Lord but a Lover.

Ultimately the answer to whether are not we are Jesus' type is rooted in a relationship with him that is both inward-reaching and outward-seeking. In knowing him and serving him we'll find we are, indeed, his type. Thanks be to God.