

Luke 10:1 After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. 2 He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. 3 Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. 4 Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. 5 Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' 6 And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. 7 Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. 8 Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; 9 cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'

Recently I've been reading Michael J. Sheeran's book on Quaker decision-making. Sheeran is a Jesuit priest who decided to study the Quaker way of coming to unity because the Jesuit order, when they tried the practice, was having a difficult time. He wound up writing the book that most Friends turn to when they want to understand how the Quaker thing works, and the book is kept in print by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting because it is so valuable to Friends.

Anyway, in my usual slow way, I am working my way from front to back, and although I am farther than the preface, it's still true that one of the most memorable ideas I've taken in so far belongs to the Quaker author Douglas Steere, who wrote the preface. From many years experience of Friends and their discernment, Steere writes about some of the necessary conditions for

group discernment to work. He writes, “There is in the beginning the necessity of having a group...who know and respect and trust each other.”

[Sheeran, p. ix.]

Michael Sheeran did his research in the 1970s and 1980s, and Douglas Steere wrote his preface in the early 80s. By that time, Steere was already moving into old age. I believe he’s right that Quaker process works best among a group of people who know, respect, and trust each other. But I think I can’t assume as easily as Steere maybe does that any Friends meeting will be a group of people who know and trust one another, because, after all, they’ve all managed to find each other in this one place. I am two or three generation removed from Douglas Steere, and when I look around at my world, it looks as though at work, at play, and at Meeting, it’s harder and harder for us to know one another. The big argument of a book called *Bowling Alone*, which was published in the year 2000, was that Americans spend more and more time on their own or in their immediate family, and less and less time in any kind of social context. We don’t connect beyond our own homes. And increasingly, the social fabric of our lives is ripped and full of holes.

So it’s interesting to me to think about the way Jesus sends his disciples out in pairs to go about the work of bringing near the kingdom of God. This time when I read the passage from Luke, and the similar passages in Matthew and Mark, what’s interesting to me is not so much the kind of work the disciples are doing, but the fact that they’ve been sent off together to do it. Because in my experience, travelling together and working together are both endeavors that build trust or break it; but more likely build it.

I imagine these pairs, more or less strangers to each other, at the first crossroads. They’re going to a town they’ve never been to before, and here is this crossroad. Off to the left, dry dusty sand and a wild camel in the distance. Off to the right, dry dusty sand and the specks of a grazing herd on a faraway hill. How do they decide? What do they do when one of them wants to sit down and wait for some traveller to pass by who can tell them the way, and the

other wants to follow his gut and head off toward the distant herd of sheep?

When I was in college, and a little bit after, I drove from the Chesapeake Bay to west of the Mississippi five or six times, taking largely a different route each time. It was a time in my life when I absolutely refused to drive on any interstate, so I drove through lots and lots of small towns in Kentucky and Maryland, Missouri and Illinois and West Virginia, Arkansas and Iowa. Without even realizing it, or knowing how, I began to understand that there is a pattern in the way small towns are laid out, and I began to know when the highway turned left or right, and I learned how to follow my route even when the signs were less than informative, or missing altogether.

Later on in life when I was a newspaper photographer, I had to learn how to deal with the directions people gave me, which were often skewed a few degrees from reality. I began to understand that if someone told me, “just past the white barn,” that was something to watch for, but if they said, “half a mile after you turn,” I better hope they were giving me some other sign as well.

Anyway, you put those experiences together, and you wind up with something you might call a sense of direction. Michel just calls it “the force” She does okay with it now, but it wasn’t always that way. We would be somewhere in Kentucky or Tennessee for some yearly meeting function, and she’d be looking at the map and saying, I just can’t tell where you turn, and I’d say, well, we’re not there yet, or, I think it’s coming up in a few blocks, and it drove her crazy that in a place I’d never been before I wasn’t navigating by the map. I was navigating by the lines of the valleys and the layout of the town square, and there was nothing in that which could be checked on a map. It drove her crazy at first, but eventually, through experience, she came to trust it. Now, as often as not, when we come to a confusing piece of road, she gives me the info she has and then tells me to drive by the force.

The point is, it takes a while to learn to trust your traveling companions, to learn that sometimes it’s a great virtue to be traveling with someone who doesn’t mind asking a stranger for directions, and other times there’s great

virtue in knowing that where there are sheep in the desert, a town is likely just beyond the horizon.

So, back to the gospel, here are these companions, new to one another, who first off have to learn to get along with different navigational styles. Then Jesus asks these traveling ministers to go about the work of healing the sick. Well, what if one is better at it than the other? What if one of you somehow raises a woman from the dead, and then wherever you go, one of you is known as the magician, and the other one is the magician's friend? But still you keep traveling together from town to town. Every new town, your companion tells the same old stories. Does that bother you? Or he used to be a tax collector, and you know that every home you go into, he's mentally adding up what the folks in that house are worth.

At the same time, though, even though you can't stand to listen to him at dinner, you have to admit that when he leads the evening prayers, he really gathers the people's attention and lifts it to God. And the former tax collector, you come to admire the way he is so adept at choosing a house to stay in where the occupants will be honored, but not financially ruined, by your visit.

That's the thing about travel, and about joint work. You wind up knowing more about your companion than he or she wants you to know. You probably also wind up knowing more about your traveling companion than you want to know. In the end, though, as long as you're committed to the work and the journey, what you finally know is more real than what you've imagined, made up, or projected. After all that travel and work, you've come to the place where your friend isn't the person you think can do no wrong, and your enemy is someone you chronically disagree with but can't find the heart to dislike. There's just too much experience that binds you together. And because of that reality, you've gotten to the place Douglas Steere writes about, the place where you know each other well enough to discern God's will together.

But here we are in this Meeting, and we're not lost in Nazareth, and not many of us are out there together healing the sick and binding the wounds of

the lame. How are we going to have enough of a journey that we come to know each other well enough to discern God's will together?

Well, one modest suggestion is that we attend the Meeting retreat together, which is coming up in a couple of weeks. Not because, in this one retreat, we're going to feel God commission us the way Jesus commissioned the disciples and sent them out to bring the kingdom near. We might, eventually—maybe not this time but the time after the next time—we might, eventually, come close to feeling something like a leading about a common direction to move in. And maybe we won't. But we're bound to learn something about our traveling companions. Just sitting down together and talking about why we came here in the first place, what happens when we're here, what we like and what could be better, what we dream of when we dream of a faith community...that's where, maybe, our trust and our respect can begin. They will grow, I'm certain of it, when we find ways to work together. But they'll start when we sit at the crossroads and listen to all the different roads by which we've arrived here, and all the different methods we have of finding our way.