

“Shepherding and Rocket Science”

Methinks we make things too hard.

The first contact was actually an email, not even a text or phone call. A longtime acquaintance, who helped us start our first church nearly 40 years ago, emailed a brief message that her husband had only days to live. We had heard of his diagnosis of Alzheimer’s, but not of any notable physical decline. I immediately called her and learned that a three-week case of pneumonia had robbed her husband of his remaining strength, and he was in a coma. She emphasized that she did not expect us to change our schedule, or to drive the two hours to see them. She simply wanted us to know. After praying with her and hanging up, I related the news to my wife. She immediately started changing clothes and said, “We’re going up there. Now.” That evening, we spent nearly two hours in his room with 3 generations of family reminiscing, crying, hugging, and praying. An hour after we left, our friend passed into the presence of Jesus.

What gnawed at me over the next few days was the assumption our dear friend made that we were very busy in our important ministry of “serving the churches,” or worse yet, my ever-so-brief secret and sinful internal agreement with her that visiting the sick and dying was the ministry of local elders and pastors, and my work was the strategic work of equipping those elders and pastors to lead their churches more effectively. Fortunately, the hypocrisy of that thinking fell away in time for me to come to my senses and experience the indescribable blessing of loving, crying, grieving, and rejoicing with some godly friends as a loved one finished his race on this temporal earth.

It opened my eyes to another story unfolding at the same time. Back in the mid 1970’s I made numerous attempts to explain my newfound zeal about Jesus to my parents. I naively branded them as “saved but lukewarm,” and began praying that God would bring someone into my dad’s life who could communicate the notion of commitment, discipleship, and discipling more effectively than I had been able to do. Along came Fred. An electrician by trade until his mid-40s, Fred “found Jesus,” and went off to seminary. He arrived in our tiny ranching town a freshly minted, middle-aged pastor. Fred and his wife latched onto my hard-working rancher parents in a way that only a seasoned blue-collar worker could have done. Without teaching or preaching or strategically planning, Fred and his wife loved my parents as few ever had. Fast forward to last week. Fred, now an 89-year-old widower, learned of a former parishioner from our small ranch town passing away. He got into his aging Buick there in Oklahoma and drove the 14 hours/1000 miles to be with the widow. And while in the area, he made the rounds to say hello, love, hug, and pray with everyone he knew from that pastorate season which technically ended almost 25 years ago. In his mind it never did.

There is much debate these days about the definitions and metrics of making disciples. What is a disciple of Jesus? How do we make more of them? How do we make more of them which make more of them? When does addition of disciples break through to the multiplication of disciples? How intentional and strategic do we have to be? Do we use curricula and programs or simply wing it and live life together? I find myself in the thick of concern about this topic, and will continue to wrestle with these questions. But in the meantime, I’m pretty sure my friend Fred’s answer to these questions is all summed up in the statement... “Why, I simply love them.” And the people he loves know he loves them, and they know it is in the name and power of Jesus that he loves them like Jesus does.

While I could exegete the statement in Hebrews 13:5 that God will never desert or forsake me, and link it systematically with its source in Deuteronomy 31:1-8 where a soon-to-die Moses confidently stared death in the face and admonished his understudy Joshua to be strong and courageous in the light of God’s promised faithfulness and presence, I know for a fact that my parents believe that promise is true from the demonstration of faithfulness in God’s tireless servant Fred. And I pray that my friends with whom I am grieving will catch a glimpse of the heart and faithfulness of Jesus by my oh-so-imperfect example.

This really isn’t rocket science after all.

Proverbs 3:3-4: Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.