

“The Funnel Effect

OT 14C-19

Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

July 7, 2019

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“The Funnel Effect”

My family and I loved our old home in NJ. But when we moved in, we kept hearing these funny smacking sounds. It sounded like something was whacking the side of the house, but when I went out to see if I could identify the cause, like maybe a tree branch swaying in the wind, I could find nothing—nothing even remotely close enough to the house that could make that sort of noise.

Then, one Saturday morning following an overnight thunderstorm, a neighbor knocked on our door. “Hey Rob, I wanted to let you know some siding came off your house and blew into our yard.”

“Oh great.” I went to check it out, and sure enough, there in the middle of his front yard was a chunk of siding from the side of our home.

And just to left of our siding was a chunk of my neighbor’s siding, too!

“Looks like it got us both,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said, “Darn’ funnel effect.” Except he didn’t say “darn.”

He could tell by the look on my face I had no idea what he was talking about.

So here’s what I learned. Our homes sat within a cluster development—a development of single, detached homes sort of smushed together, with tiny little side-yards. So tiny, in fact, that the side yards were too small to divide between houses. So one house owned all of one side yard, but none of the other side yard.

The problem with this wasn’t just tiny side yards, though. As my neighbor explained, because our homes were so closely shoved together, they produced too much of a barrier to strong winds. So when the winds hit against the row of our homes, it caused this sort of funnel effect, as the winds would accumulate and then accelerate around the houses in order to make it through the small breaks in the side yards.

It’s why even on just a moderately breezy day we could hear the sound of wind smacking against the side of our home. And it’s why we lost siding more a couple times.

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But that’s just one version of the funnel effect. Rhetoric 101 teaches another regarding public speaking. Start big, and then funnel down to your main point.

In seminary, my first preaching professor essentially shared the same thing. He said, “When talking about something that might be hard for folks to hear or for you to share, start your sermon by talking about the issue from a global perspective, before moving on to explore the same issue from a more local perspective, before finally exploring that same issue from a personal perspective.”

This is, of course, far from the only method of sermon-writing, but it's an effective way of winnowing a big, complex issue down to a persona, take home and apply to your life perspective.

After all, that's what a funnel does. It takes something big... maybe seemingly too big... and focuses it down until it gets to a relatable, tangible size to apply and use.

How can we talk about this huge, complex, multifaceted issue?

Funnel it down.

How can we even begin to tackle this problem that seems unsolvable... even impractical to approach?

The funnel effect says to funnel or focus it down.

How can we even begin to live into God's expectations that we help spread God's kingdom? How can we take on something as grandiose and out of our league as kingdom building?

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Well, that's what our lesson this morning is about, as Jesus commissions 70 followers to go and spread the kingdom of God in neighboring villages... to go and form relationships with people they've never met... who don't know they're coming... and may have never even heard about Jesus Christ and the kingdom he came to reveal. "Go," Jesus tells them, "grow the kingdom there."

It's a big ask. But it's even worse than we might assume. For up to this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus is the only one who's ever done any kind of kingdom building—any kind ministry. The disciples and the crowds, they've been following Jesus for quite a while now... but all they'd really done is watch Jesus heal and listen to Jesus teach. I mean, don't get me wrong, they'd witnessed amazing things, but it's not like a single follower had any practice at all at with this thing called kingdom building.

If that's not enough, listen again to Jesus' instructions. "I need to be clear," he said. "I'm sending you out like lambs in the midst of wolves. And you can take nothing—nothing—with you. No food, no money, no extra clothes, no weapons for protection, no smartphones to pass the time or keep in touch."

"Take nothing with you so you'll have no other option than to embrace the people you meet. Without resources of your own, you'll have no choice but to invest in people you don't even know. This way, though you may be strangers at first, they won't be strangers for long."

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Granted, he didn't say it quite like that, but in a very real way, his instructions were really just a funnel... designed to help his followers focus on what matters when it comes to kingdom building.

"Take nothing with you, so that you are forced to focus on the quality and care within your *relationships*."

When you funnel it down, that's how the kingdom grows, right? Through our relationships. Through perspectives being shared. Through questions being asked. Through struggles being confessed. Through forgiveness being practiced. Through grief being expressed. Through generosity being modeled. Through stories being told. Through grace being pursued with family and friends, as well as strangers and foreigners.

So while I readily recognize that, amid our 21st century perspective, Jesus' kingdom building instructions here might seem needlessly limiting, maybe even overly harsh... Jesus doesn't offer them to be admonish his followers. Rather, he offers them to help us focus on what matters... that we might funnel down and see the power we have to build the kingdom.

Jesus knew... our money, our possessions, our security blankets, our rules and regulations... these crutches we carry all too easily become our distractions. Think about it. Because they do... our crutches become our distractions. And then... our distractions become our resistances to doing what we're truly called to do.

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Daniel Higgins puts it like this amid the story of "The Fisherman's Fellowship."

The folks in the "Fisherman's Fellowship" were surrounded by streams and lakes full of hungry fish. They met regularly to discuss the call to fish, and the thrill of catching fish.

One day, someone suggested they needed a philosophy of fishing, so they carefully defined and redefined fishing. They discussed the purpose of fishing. They developed fishing strategies and tactics.

But then they realized they'd been going at it backwards. They'd been approaching fishing from the point of view of the fisherman, rather than the perspective of the fish. How do fish view the world? How does the fisherman appear to the fish? What do fish eat, and when? These are all good things to know.

So they began research studies. Some attended conferences on fishing. Some travelled to far away places to study different kinds of fish with different habits. Some even got PhD's in fishology.

But no one had yet gone fishing.

So here's what they did—they formed a committee to send out fishermen. But because prospective fishing places outnumbered fishermen, the committee needed to determine priorities. So a priority list of fishing places was posted on bulletin boards in all of the fellowship halls.

But still, no one was fishing.

They decided to launch a survey to find out why... Most didn't answer the survey, but from those that did, it was discovered that some felt called to study fish, a few felt compelled to furnish fishing equipment, and several wanted to go around encouraging the fisherman.

So by this point, what with meetings, conferences, and seminars, no one had any time to fish even if they wanted to.

Now, Jake was a newcomer to the Fisherman's Fellowship. After one stirring meeting of the Fellowship, Jake decided he would go fishing. He went out to a lake, tried a few things, got the hang of it, and guess what?! He caught a choice fish!

At the next meeting, he told his story and was honored for his catch. Then, he was scheduled to speak at all the Fellowship chapters to tell how he did it. But because of all the speaking invitations and his election to the board of directors of the Fisherman's Fellowship, Jake no longer had time to go fishing.

Soon, Jake, began to feel restless and empty... distracted and unfulfilled. He realized he longed to feel the tug on the line again. So he cancelled his speaking engagements; he resigned from the board of the Fisherman's Fellowship; and he said to a friend, "Let's go fishing."

That's what they did, just the two of them. They went fishing. And you know what? They caught fish.

The members of the Fisherman's Fellowship were many, the fish were plentiful, but the actual fishers were few.¹

Amen.

¹ "The Fisherman's Fellowship," original source unknown; <https://storiesforpreaching.com/the-fishermans-fellowship/>. Adapted.