

A person comes to another person

Mustard Seed in Concrete

by Rev. Michael Weinmann

Why not simply leave one another in peace? Why something like “mission”? Doesn’t every person know for themselves what is good for them? Yes, of course! But alongside that stands the experience that we are trapped in many things, that powers enslave people. We are not as free as we think.

But when people experience liberation, this becomes for them an obligation to communicate the paths of liberation to others. Yet caution: mission is not a publicity campaign for the church. The communication of the gospel serves the liberation of people. “The truth will set you free,” says Jesus. Therefore our mission points beyond ourselves. It brings us into a comprehensive process of communication with the people to whom we are sent—and it will change us as well.

From the very beginning it is therefore important that we give an account of the attitude with which we speak to others about what is vital to us. By the very nature of our calling it is impossible simply to set off and start talking, convinced that somehow we will say and do the right thing. Whoever crosses boundaries and enters unfamiliar cultural or social contexts should beware of what in post-colonial discourse is called “saviorism.” We are not the saviors. It is not about *our* movement. It is about *God’s* movement. If my movement is not part of God’s movement, it may happen that—perhaps very piously—I am simply doing my own thing.

Therefore the first thing is that we are present before God and among the people to whom he sends us.

One might call this “**missionary presence.**” At first this means nothing more than being a human being among human beings. That I pray and read the Bible, that I have a passionate hope—these things will eventually also come into conversation. But the beginning is our bodily presence.

The next thing is attentive, alert perception.

Where am I here? Who are the people with whom I share this place and this time? And where is Jesus in all of this? If we are there in His name, part of His movement toward people, then this has consequences for our attitude and our language. We will not make our own culture and background the standard. Rather, we will first notice what is important to the people around us—what they hear when we say “God.”

An example from a religious education class:

The students in an eighth-grade class were asked whether and how strongly they feel secure with God. They were to position themselves on a scale from 0 to 10.

“I don’t believe in God,” said one girl, stepping aside. “I can’t take part in that.”

Note carefully: the student did not stand at zero, which would have meant “I do not feel secure with God.” She stood beside the scale entirely. In the traditional structure of the lesson she had no place. The question of God is foreign to her. And that is not her fault. It is simply her cultural formation. She lives in a context in which the question of God is not asked. She cannot imagine what God might have to do with her life.

The question formulated in religious language—“Do you feel secure with God, do you feel accepted by God?”—causes bewilderment in a girl who grew up in a non-religious context. She answers neither yes nor no, but simply withdraws from the question altogether.

And yet at that moment the point was not really the question of God. Luther’s insight was supposed to be communicated: you are not important because of your performance. You are good, you are beautiful, because you are looked upon in love. Your life is a wonderful gift. And that is grace.

Must a person first believe in the existence of God in order to understand that?

I am convinced that our task is not to explain an entire system of religious, theological, or pious ideas so that people can understand that a radical “yes” has been spoken over their lives. Rather, our task is to announce this “yes” in such a way that it can reach the heart of a fourteen-year-old like her.

She should see and experience through us: for these Jesus-people my life is not unimportant. They see something in me that I myself have not yet noticed. For them I matter—and that has something to do with what these people call “God.”

Not that we explain to people “that God exists,” but that they experience through us how encouraging His presence is, and that God’s being-there-for-us motivates us to open ourselves and move beyond our comfort zone.

People should be able to perceive it through our presence:

I am not indifferent to them.

They are interested in me.

Not just to tell me about their God.

They want me to do well.

These people embody the love of God.

What if we began to speak about God in such a way that the existential significance of this love—in which and from which we live—became visible and audible as a real invitation for people to discover an unknown, previously buried dimension of life?

What if we could translate our important theological insights into living experience so that in encounter a resonance emerges that becomes an existential challenge—just as it did in Jesus’ encounters with people?

Then suddenly people who had no room to move stood up and set out. The blind opened their eyes and saw new perspectives.

At this point we are all learners and still very much at the beginning of our efforts.

We notice that some formulations cause bewilderment. Must we therefore abandon “religious” vocabulary? Not necessarily. Words such as God, church, faith, worship service, pastor are also only human words. People want to know who we are.

Sometimes it may happen that someone says:

“Oh, you’re from the church? I wouldn’t have expected them to do something like this. I’m not really like that myself, but good—my respect.”

On the other hand it may happen that a mother, to whom I introduced myself as a pastor, says to her daughter—who would like to come to our children’s time in the shop:

“We don’t need that!”

It may cause bewilderment that there are people crazy enough to believe in God. And it provokes. And that is as it should be.

“Do you believe in Jesus?” a nine-year-old shouts to me across the square.

I walk toward him: “Yes.”

“I don’t,” he replies with a grin.

Some time later he returns with a friend:

“Everyone here believes in God,” he says, turning to me.

“That’s true, isn’t it? He didn’t believe me.”

The friend cleverly explains to me that belief is not knowledge.

Should I now start a discussion and try to prove God?

Instead I simply tell them:

“I believe that both of you are important to God. And that God wants to begin something new and beautiful with the people in Gotha-West.”

In the end, I do not know what God will make of such encounters. I want to wait and see what He does. It is not my task to demonstrate God or make him effective. He will do that Himself in his own time.

My task is this:

to have time,

to listen,

to give others space,

to welcome them as they are,

not to speak too quickly or constantly about God—

simply to wait.

What does that mean concretely?

How do I comfort a non-religious person who tells me about the terrible death by accident of a colleague?

I must take time, be present, listen. The message I can communicate now is the encounter itself. I allow the hopelessness of the situation to be there. I endure the helplessness without comforting myself with my (pious) words.

We are not there to propagate a Christian worldview.

We are there to be present and to testify to the presence of Christ—to let Jesus’ presence shine and thus bring into the light those toward whom He is drawn: the poor and the excluded, the wounded and the lonely, the hopeless. And to do so without making them feel that they are the poor and excluded.

One could say it very simply:

Our task is to love people.

We go to them because Jesus sends his own like sheep among wolves, carrying nothing with them except his peace.

The treasure that Christ gives to people is not in our hands. We are earthen vessels and hear the call:

“Go where I am. I am expecting you.”

Notes on the title

“Not a new idea, not a better religion could achieve the goal. A person comes to another person.”

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 299.

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<https://www.senfkorntadtmission.de/>

A spoken version of the text:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-f0rxNOY-M>