

One Small Step

5th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 82. Amos 7:7-17. Colossians 1:1-14. Luke 10: 25 - 37

Who else is fascinated with the 50th anniversary of Apollo 11 this week? The engineering of the whole enterprise still astounds me. We took people to the moon on the computing power of a toaster. I've read that an I-phone is 120 million times faster than Apollo era computers.

But this great human and scientific event almost never happened.

In May of 1961, President Kennedy challenged the nation to get to the moon by the end of the decade. At that time, NASA had a grand total of 5 minutes of flight experience – Alan Shepherd's flight. There were no concrete plans for making this happen when President Kennedy issued the challenge.

But NASA had been thinking about it. There were two active thought experiments. Most scientists were in the Direct Ascent camp. The idea was to launch a ship equipped to navigate to the moon, land on the surface, and return to earth. Doing this would require a giant rocket, way bigger than a Saturn V. The rocket didn't exist yet, of course, but these scientists thought they would be able to scale up. The other idea was to launch multiple Saturn Vs all with pieces of the kind of spaceship you'd need to land on the moon. Assemble the pieces in about the Earth, navigate to the moon, land on the surface, fly home. This was the Earth Orbit Rendezvous camp.

One guy at NASA said there was no way either approach would work. He described himself as a voice crying in the wilderness. John Houbolt was an airplane engineer, not an aerospace guy. He was a second-generation immigrant working in the lower levels of NASA. No one really cared about his opinion, but he thought both approaches would be disasters. A Direct Ascent vehicle would be so heavy there was no way to build a rocket big enough to launch it. Earth Orbit Rendezvous would be too expensive and complex. He proposed another idea. Lunar Orbit Rendezvous. Launch two vehicles on top of one Saturn V – a command module to get to you to the moon and a lunar module to go to the surface. This proposal would save weight which meant saving fuel. It would work with existing rocket technology. It was cheaper and simpler. He later described it as a Chevy, not a Cadillac.

Of course, this is what happened. But initially everyone at NASA dismissed Houbolt's idea. So, in late 1961, a few months after Kennedy's challenge, Houbolt bypassed proper channels. He wrote a 9-page private letter directly to the incoming Associate Administrator dismissing the two proposed models and offered his third idea. He wrote in the letter, "Do we want to go to the moon or not?" This did not win him any friends, and Houbolt actually left NASA for a time. But before he left, NASA adopted his idea, and on July 20, 1969 the Eagle landed.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus was John Houbolt to the lawyer's NASA.

The lawyer had a goal. He wanted eternal life, better translated as the life of the ages. He wanted to live the life of God now and in the age to come. The disciples had just returned from their mission of proclaiming the good news. He saw their excitement and purpose. He wanted the full and abundant life he saw in them and in Jesus. So he asked, "What must **I** do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus, always the good teacher, turned the question back on him. And the guy had an answer. He had studied God's law. He knew the conventional wisdom. Love God with all you have. And love your neighbor as yourself. There was nothing wrong with that, Jesus said. "Do this, and you will live."

But then the guy got serious. Like President Kennedy's challenge, his question moved from thought experiment to reality. Who is my neighbor?

So Jesus told a story that invited him to rethink his whole approach. Jesus knew how easy it is to get distracted by theory and ignore practice. So he moved the lawyer from a debate about the law to a story about practicing the law. The story he told was not about big rockets or grand gestures. The characters involved were not impressive role models, like a priest or a Levite. One was a crime victim and the other a social outcast. This was a Chevy, not a Cadillac, an ordinary, human encounter no one would notice.

To be clear, the world needs the big gestures, too. It took a big Saturn V and a medium-sized command module to get the tiny lunar lander into position. We do need the big gestures. We do need to fight and vote and work and give to protect equality and promote equal opportunity and eliminate unfairness and heal the wrongs in the world. The law of God which the lawyer knew so well is God's gift to the world. The way to make life good for everyone is to love God with all you have and love your neighbor as yourself. *Arise, O God, and rule the earth, for you shall take all nations for your own.* That is the goal.

But the purpose of the law is to get us into position to live it out. The life of the ages unfolds in small ways that everyone can share. A story about a single act of kindness between two strangers was a picture of the kind of eternal life that can happen right now.

You may have seen a story in the paper this week about a similar moment of eternal life happening here in Columbus. The story was about a group called La Paz Amigos. They are a very ad hoc network of about 15 folks from Columbus and the surrounding area. They learned that men who are released from Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin are usually brought straight from Stewart to Columbus. The men have been released on bond awaiting a court date, or they've been granted asylum or other permission to stay, or the issues that brought them into detention have been resolved, so they are free to leave. You cannot get released without having family or a sponsor somewhere to take you in, so these men all have a place to go. But they have to get there. The Detention Center brings them to the Greyhound station or to the Groome office. Most of the time, family members have made arrangements for what to do from there.

But sometimes the men or their families need help arranging transportation. Sometimes the timing of their release means they missed dinner and need a meal. Sometimes they arrive after the last bus has left for the day and they need a place to stay overnight. When they are released they are given the clothes and belongings they had on them when they were detained, so they may need clean clothes or a warm jacket. Sometimes they just need a way to make a phone call.

La Paz Amigos organized to offer little acts of kindness. They take turns being on call Monday through Friday each week. Sometimes they get a call saying that people are coming, so they have time to prepare. Sometimes they don't. They check at Greyhound and Groome to see if anyone needs a meal or other help. They bring bags of toiletries and snacks and a change of clothes. They offer a phone to make calls. They created a network of folks who speak different languages to help with communication. If folks need a place to stay, there are funds available to pay for a hotel.

This is not a big rocket policy approach. It's definitely a Chevy, not a Cadillac. This group is not going to solve all the challenges in the immigration system or change the patterns of human migration happening all over the

world. These are just ordinary people offering human kindness to folks in a vulnerable position. Like the Samaritan did to the man on the side of the road.

Jesus asked the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

So give thanks for the law of God that gets us into position and orbits around us and brings us home. Those small steps are all part of the giant leap of God.

<https://www.zmescience.com/research/technology/smartphone-power-compared-to-apollo-432/>

<https://the1a.org/audio/#/shows/2019-07-08/fly-me-to-the-moon-50-years-since-apollo-11/118190/@00:00>