

The Pride of Giving Series

Stepping Aside and Tipping the Hat

On small gestures, their enormous consequences, and the theology of a hat-tip.

The Story

When a BBC interviewer asked Desmond Tutu what the defining moment of his life was, he spoke of an ordinary day — a walk down a street with his mother.

A tall white man in a black suit was coming toward them.

In apartheid South Africa, the rule was unwritten but absolute: when a black person and a white person met on the sidewalk, the black person stepped aside and bowed their head. The posture looked like deference. It was, in fact, submission enforced by fear.

But that day, before young Tutu and his mother could move, the white man stepped off the sidewalk first — and tipped his hat to her as they passed.

A simple step.

A hat removed.

A greeting given where the law said none was owed.

That man was Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican priest and fierce opponent of apartheid. The gesture changed Tutu's life.

When his mother explained afterward that Huddleston had done this because he was a man of God, Tutu found his direction.

*“When my mother told me he was an Anglican priest,
I decided right there that I wanted to be an Anglican priest too.
Moreover, I wanted to be a man of God.”*

— Desmond Tutu

Huddleston later became Tutu's mentor. His belief that every human being is made in the image of God became the center of Tutu's lifelong opposition to apartheid.

Dr. Park closes the story with a prayer:

*My prayer is that we all strive to be “God’s people” —
who willingly step aside,*

*who tip our hats,
to our sisters and brothers,
especially those the world has made invisible.*

Note on apartheid: The system of racial segregation and white minority rule in South Africa, enforced by law from 1948 until the early 1990s.

Note on the footnote Dr. Park adds: When Huddleston tipped his hat to Tutu's mother, he was, in the words of Matthew 25:40, greeting Christ. He did not see a black woman required by law to step aside. He saw the image of God.

Small Group Discussion Guide — Church Community

This is a relay story. Huddleston acts. Tutu's mother names it. Tutu receives it. And at the end, Dr. Park turns to us. The structure of the story is itself the invitation: the gesture passes from person to person, generation to generation. The discussion task is to ask where we stand in the relay — and who is waiting ahead of us on the sidewalk.

Young Adults (20s–35)

Opening (5 min)

Has a small gesture from someone — something they may not even remember doing — stayed with you? What was it, and why did it matter?

Discussion (20 min)

1. Huddleston didn't give a speech. He didn't explain himself. He just stepped aside and tipped his hat. Why do you think a wordless gesture had more power than a speech might have had?
2. Tutu's mother named what she had seen: "he's a man of God." Without her interpretation, does the gesture have the same power? What role does the person who names a thing play in whether it changes someone?
3. Tutu didn't just want to be a priest — he wanted to be "a man of God." The gesture on the sidewalk became a definition. What has shaped your definition of what it means to live faithfully? Was it an event, a person, a single moment?
4. Dr. Park closes with a prayer, not a lesson. What's the difference? What does it mean to close a story with a prayer rather than an application?

Scripture (10 min)

Matthew 25:40

"Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Dr. Park's footnote makes the Matthew connection explicit: when Huddleston tipped his hat, he was greeting Christ. Not being kind to a marginalized woman. Recognizing the divine. How does that shift change the meaning of the gesture? And how does it change what "stepping aside" might mean in your own life?

Application (5 min)

Is there someone in your life right now who is used to stepping aside for others — who has learned to make themselves small? What would it look like to step off the sidewalk for them this week?

Adults (36–60)

Opening (5 min)

Has there been a moment in your life — not a dramatic event, just a gesture or a sentence — that you can trace your direction back to? What was it?

Discussion (20 min)

5. The law in apartheid South Africa required black people to step aside. The law was clear. Huddleston broke it — not by confronting it, not by protesting it, but by embodying the opposite. What does that form of resistance look like, and when is it more powerful than direct confrontation?
6. Tutu's mother was the interpreter. She gave the gesture its meaning. In your own life — who have been the interpreters? People who named what you saw, or told you what something meant, and by doing so changed what you did with it?
7. Huddleston later became Tutu's mentor. The sidewalk gesture was a seed; the mentorship was the soil. What is the relationship between a single transforming moment and the long relationship required to grow what it started?
8. The apartheid law enforced a posture of submission and called it deference. What systems or structures in your context — family, workplace, society — enforce submission while calling it something more acceptable? What does it look like to step off that sidewalk?

Scripture (10 min)

Genesis 1:27

"So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

Huddleston's theology was rooted here. Every person — including a black woman required by law to bow her head — bears the image of God. That belief, held in the body, expressed in a gesture, became the foundation of Tutu's life's work. What would it mean to hold that belief not just intellectually but in the body — in posture, in attention, in who you greet first?

Application (5 min)

Dr. Park's prayer is for people who "willingly" step aside — the word willingly matters. Where in your life is the stepping-aside reluctant? And what would make it willing?

Seniors (60+)

Opening (5 min)

Looking back — whose hat-tip are you still carrying? A gesture someone made, a word someone said, that you have built something on?

Discussion (20 min)

9. Tutu says the sidewalk incident was “the defining moment” of his life. He was a child at the time. He became a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and archbishop. What do you make of the relationship between the smallness of a seed and the size of what grows from it?
10. Huddleston was a man of profound conviction — and he expressed it through a hat-tip on an ordinary Tuesday. How do deep beliefs find their way into small gestures? And which direction does the formation go: do we act our way into belief, or believe our way into action?
11. Tutu’s mother was present, and she named it. If she hadn’t, would Tutu have had the words for what he felt? Who in your life has helped you name something you experienced but couldn’t articulate?
12. Dr. Park closes with a prayer. He is in his seventies. He has watched the relay of this story go from Huddleston to Tutu’s mother to Tutu to the world — and now he passes it to the reader. What do you want to pass on? To whom? By what gesture?

Scripture (10 min)

Micah 6:8

“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Walking humbly. Huddleston’s gesture was humble — he stepped down, removed his hat, greeted someone who the law said was beneath him. That is what humility looks like when it meets injustice: not self-deprecation, but a refusal to accept the hierarchy. What does walking humbly look like in the specific landscape of your life right now?

Application (5 min)

Who is ahead of you on the sidewalk this week — someone who is used to stepping aside? Name them. What will you do?

Small Group Discussion Guide — Community Groups

No faith background needed. The story raises questions everyone can sit with: what makes a gesture transforming rather than just kind? Who shapes the meaning of what we see? What systems enforce submission while calling it by other names? And what do we want to pass on?

Young Adults (20s–35)

Getting In (5 min)

Has something small — a gesture, a sentence, something someone did without thinking — stayed with you longer than a big event? What was it?

Discussion (20 min)

13. Tutu says the hat-tip was the defining moment of his entire life. He became one of the most important moral figures of the twentieth century. What is it about a small gesture that can carry that kind of weight? What makes it stick?
14. Tutu's mother named what happened: "he's a man of God" — and that naming gave Tutu a direction. Without the naming, would the moment have had the same power? What does the naming of something do to it?
15. Huddleston didn't explain his theology. He expressed it in a posture. Is there a difference between what someone believes and how they move through the world? Can you read a person's beliefs in how they treat people when there's nothing to be gained?
16. The apartheid rule forced black people to step aside. It was enforced humiliation with the label of social custom. What systems today enforce submission or invisibility while giving it a more acceptable name?

Going Further (10 min)

The story is a relay: Huddleston → Tutu's mother → Tutu → Dr. Park → you. Each person in the chain received something and passed it on. What have you received from someone else's gesture or courage that has shaped who you are? And what are you passing on?

One Step (5 min)

Name one person in your life who is used to stepping aside. What would stepping off the sidewalk for them look like?

Adults (36–60)

Getting In (5 min)

Has a single moment — a gesture someone made, a word someone said — shaped the direction of your life? What happened?

Discussion (20 min)

17. The apartheid law was explicit: black people stepped aside. Huddleston broke it without a protest, without a word — just by moving differently. What does that form of quiet resistance accomplish that louder forms might not?
18. Tutu's mother was the interpreter of the scene. She gave it meaning. In organizational and community life, who are the interpreters? Who names what is happening, and how does that naming shape what people do next?
19. Huddleston later mentored Tutu. A single gesture opened a relationship that formed a life's work. In your experience, what is the relationship between a transforming moment and the sustained relationship needed to grow it?
20. Immigrant and diaspora communities often have their own versions of "step aside" — unspoken rules about who speaks first, who is seen, who gets credit. What are the rules in your community? And who steps off the sidewalk?

Going Further (10 min)

The story ends with Dr. Park's prayer: that we become people who willingly step aside and tip our hats to those who are marginalized. In your professional or community context — what does that look like concretely? Not the prayer, but the gesture?

One Step (5 min)

What is one thing from this story that stays with you?

Seniors (60+)

Getting In (5 min)

Looking back: whose courage or kindness are you still carrying? Who tipped their hat to you when the world said they didn't have to?

Discussion (20 min)

21. Tutu calls it the defining moment of his life — and he was a child at the time. He didn't know what it meant until his mother explained it. What do you make of moments that are only understood later? Do they matter before they're understood?
22. Huddleston expressed his deepest conviction through his body, not his words. At this stage of your life, what do you think your body language, your habits, your automatic gestures say about what you actually believe?
23. Dr. Park passes this story to the reader as a prayer. He is in his seventies. He has been watching the relay — from apartheid South Africa to his own life in Congo and America. What is the thing you most want to pass on before you're gone? And is it in your gestures?
24. The story is about visibility — about a woman who was required by law to be invisible, and a man who refused to treat her that way. Who in your community is currently required to be invisible? What would it mean to see them?

One Step (5 min)

Share the one thing from this story that you will carry.

Small Group Discussion Guide — Immigrant and Multicultural Communities

This story will land with particular weight in communities that know what it is to be required — by law, by custom, by the unspoken rules of a new country — to step aside. It will also land for those who have been given the dignity of being seen, unexpectedly, by someone who didn't have to. Both sides of this story are alive in immigrant communities.

All Ages

Getting In (5 min)

When you arrived somewhere new — a country, a workplace, a neighborhood — what were the unwritten rules about who stepped aside? Did you have to learn them? What did learning them cost?

Discussion (20 min)

25. The apartheid rule enforced a posture and called it social custom. In your experience — in your country of origin or your country of arrival — what are the unwritten rules about who is visible and who steps aside? Are they called by their real name?
26. Huddleston stepped aside first, without being asked. In your experience: when someone from the dominant culture acknowledges your dignity or steps aside for you — what does that do? Is it just kindness, or is it something larger?
27. Tutu's mother named what she saw. In immigrant and diaspora communities, naming matters deeply — naming what is happening, naming what the children are absorbing, naming what the community is worth. Who in your community does that naming? What does it give to the next generation?
28. Dr. Park's prayer is for people who step aside — willingly, not because the law requires it, not to be praised, but because they see the image of God in the person in front of them. In your community: who does that? What does it look like?

Going Further (10 min)

Facilitator note: *This section often opens the most unexpected conversation. Many people in immigrant communities have been on both sides: required to step aside themselves, and at some point, shown unexpected dignity by someone who didn't have to give it. Both experiences are worth naming. And some have been, unexpectedly, in Huddleston's position — having the choice to step aside for someone more marginalized than themselves.*

For those who have had to step aside: when someone treated you with dignity you weren't required to receive — what did that do? Did you name it for your children or community the way Tutu's mother named it for him? For those who have had Huddleston's choice: when have you been in a position to step aside for someone more invisible than you — and did you? What made it possible, or hard?

One Step (5 min)

Finish this sentence: "The person ahead of me on the sidewalk this week is _____. I will step aside by _____."

Leader's Guide

For Church Groups and Community Groups

In Dr. Park's Own Words

*"Huddleston didn't explain himself.
He didn't hold a sign or give a speech.
He stepped aside.
He removed his hat.
He greeted her.
That was all.
And it was enough to make Desmond Tutu.
My prayer is that it is enough to make us too."*

Reflection questions from Dr. Park:

29. Why does a body speak louder than an argument, in certain moments?
30. Who is the Tutu's mother in my life — the one who named things for me and gave me a direction?
31. Am I passing the relay, or am I holding the baton?
32. Who is required to step aside in my daily world, and have I accepted that as normal?

What This Story Is Really About

On the surface this is a historical anecdote: Tutu, Huddleston, apartheid. But it has four layers, and the discussion needs to move through all of them:

- Layer 1 — The gesture itself: A small act of bodily recognition, in a context where it was illegal. Huddleston's theology was expressed in his posture before it was ever spoken aloud.
- Layer 2 — The naming: Tutu's mother gave the gesture its meaning. Without her, Tutu has an experience but not a direction. The interpreter is as essential as the actor.
- Layer 3 — The relay: This is not a story about two people on a sidewalk. It is a story about a gesture that moved through generations. Huddleston → Tutu's mother → Tutu → the world → Dr. Park → the reader. Every person in the room is now in the relay.
- Layer 4 — The Matthew 25:40 footnote: When Huddleston tipped his hat, he was, in Dr. Park's reading, greeting Christ. He wasn't performing virtue for a marginalized woman. He was recognizing the divine. That is a fundamentally different motivation — and it changes the character of the gesture entirely.

The facilitation task is to arrive at Layer 4 without bypassing Layers 1–3. The Matthew connection should feel like a discovery, not an explanation.

How to Open the Session

For all groups:

“Close your eyes for a moment. Think of a gesture someone made toward you — something they may not even remember — that you are still carrying. Don't share it yet. Just find it.” Pause. Then: “We're going to read a story about a hat-tip on a sidewalk in South Africa, eighty years ago, that became the defining moment of a Nobel Peace Prize laureate's life. We'll come back to what you're holding at the end.”

Facilitator note: *Read the sidewalk scene slowly. Pause after “tipped his hat to her.” Let it sit before continuing. The scene needs room to be seen before it is explained.*

For groups less comfortable with silence, an alternative opening:

“If you had to name one person who changed your life by doing something small — not a grand speech, not a dramatic intervention, just a gesture or a sentence — who would it be? What did they do?”

Watch for These Three Risks

Risk 1: The story becomes a history lesson about apartheid and stays there

What it looks like: Discussion focuses on apartheid, South African history, Tutu's biography — important and true, but the story doesn't land in the room.

Why it matters: The historical context is essential, but it's the container, not the content. The content is the relay: the gesture is being passed to each person in the room right now.

Redirect: "We've been talking about apartheid-era South Africa. Let's bring it here: what are the unwritten rules in your daily world about who steps aside? Who is required to be invisible? And have you accepted that as normal?"

Risk 2: Huddleston becomes the hero and the group watches from a safe distance

What it looks like: The discussion becomes an admiration of Huddleston's courage and clarity. He was extraordinary. But Dr. Park's closing prayer is addressed to us, not to history.

Why it matters: Admiring Huddleston from a distance is the opposite of receiving the relay. The story is designed to pass something to the reader. The group's job is to receive it, not observe it.

Redirect: "Huddleston's gesture was extraordinary because the context made it costly. In your own context — what is the equivalent? Not something requiring arrest, but something that would cost you something. Who is ahead of you on the sidewalk?"

Risk 3: The Matthew 25:40 connection gets treated as a proof text rather than a reframing

What it looks like: Someone reads Matthew 25:40 and says "yes, of course, we should serve the least." The verse confirms what everyone already knew. The conversation closes rather than opens.

Why it matters: Dr. Park's use of the verse is more radical than 'serve the marginalized.' He is saying that Huddleston recognized Christ in Tutu's mother — which means the hat-tip was not charity. It was recognition. The difference between charity and recognition is the difference between standing over someone and standing with them.

Redirect: "Dr. Park says Huddleston was greeting Christ. Not being kind to a poor woman — seeing Christ. What is the difference between those two things? And what does it change about how you think about the people ahead of you on your sidewalk?"

Notes for Specific Groups

Korean and Korean-American groups:

This story arrives through a Korean missionary's voice. Dr. Park is telling a South African story about race and dignity, and praying that Koreans will embody it. Korean-American communities know what it is to be required — by immigration status, by language, by cultural invisibility — to step aside. And they also know what it is to be in Huddleston's position relative to communities even more marginalized. Both experiences are worth naming directly.

Groups who have experienced racial or social marginalization:

For people who have lived versions of Tutu's mother's experience — required to bow, to step aside, to make themselves small — this story may carry unexpected weight. Give room for that. The question worth asking directly: "Has someone tipped their hat to you when they didn't have to? What did that do?"

Intergenerational groups:

The relay structure is especially powerful across generations. Ask explicitly: "Who is the Tutu's mother in this room — the one who has seen something and named it for someone younger? And who is the young Tutu — still looking for words for what you've already seen?"

Mission-engaged groups:

Huddleston's theology of the imago Dei was not expressed in a mission statement. It was expressed in his body on an ordinary street. The question for mission workers: where is the gap between your stated theology of human dignity and how you actually move through the world, day to day, in ordinary encounters?

Closing the Session

Return to the opening. If you began with the silent reflection (“find a gesture someone made that you’re still carrying”), invite two or three people to name it now — not the story, just the gesture.

Then close with Dr. Park's prayer, read aloud together or by the facilitator:

*“My prayer is that we all strive to be ‘God’s people’ —
who willingly step aside,
who tip our hats,
to our sisters and brothers,
especially those the world has made invisible.”*

Church groups:

Close with Genesis 1:27 or Matthew 25:40. Ask: “Who is the image of God that your ordinary week asks you to acknowledge? Not a grand cause — a specific person, ahead of you on the sidewalk. What will you do with your hat?”

Community groups:

Close with: “The relay in this story went from a street in South Africa to a story in a book in Korea to this room. You are now in it. The gesture is yours to carry. What will you do with it?”

*“When my mother told me he was an Anglican priest,
I decided right there that I wanted to be an Anglican priest too.
Moreover, I wanted to be a man of God.”*

— Desmond Tutu