

“The Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind”¹

Romans 10:14-17, Matthew 9:35-10:9

January 23, 2011

Collegiate Presbyterian Church

Romans 10:14-17

¹⁴But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” ¹⁶But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” ¹⁷So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

Matthew 9:35-10:9

³⁵Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. ²These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

⁵These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ ⁸Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. ⁹Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, ¹⁰no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food.

Sermon

In a world that can be so hard and scary,
it’s tempting to think of church
as a place of refuge and respite.
When your job or family responsibilities
sap every bit of energy you have,
it’s tempting to see church like a gas station
that you pull into each week to fill your tank.

¹ This sermon is adapted from Barbara Brown Taylor’s “Heaven at Hand,” published in *Bread of Angels* (Cowley, 1997), 151-155.

In a culture that has shaped us into such good shoppers,
It's tempting to think of ourselves
as consumers of God's love.

But then one day the Holy Spirit comes knocking...
reminding us to get up off our pew and get out there
because it's time to share.
Turns out we're not consumers after all,
but providers of God's love.
Turns out Jesus doesn't mean for us hunker down in here,
but to get out there.

And whether it was intentional or not,
Matthew gives us a clue of this when in one verse he writes:
"And Jesus summoned his *disciples* and gave them power..."
and in the very next verse announces:
"These are the names of the twelve *apostles*..."²

Disciples follow, apostles lead.
Disciples are students, apostles are teachers.
Disciples hang on every word that comes out of their master's mouth,
apostles take their master's words and give them to others.

It had to come as quite a shock that day he did it.
I mean, there you are, perfectly content to be a *disciple*...
enjoying the chance to sit at Jesus' feet
taking in everything he has to say...
growing each day in your understanding and commitment...
when without warning one day,
he stands up... looks around and says,
"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.
I need some help out there and I'm nominating you."
Those weren't his precise words, but close enough.
And then, he holds his hands out over your heads
and says a prayer that you really don't understand,
but it sends a chill down your spine...
because in it he gives YOU authority
over demons and disease and even death.

And when you go to say, "Thanks, but no thanks,"
when you protest that you didn't sign on for this,
he starts calling names:
"John and Jean, you head down to Campustown.
Sarah and Joe, you take the high school.
Bill and Martha, how about you cover downtown?"

² Matthew 10:1-2

Cathy and George, I'm thinking it's Research Park for you.
And Sarah and David, you hit the mall."

"Don't worry about packing,
you need to travel light.
Leave your wallets and purses here,
you won't be needing them.
And you'll go barefoot, so you won't need any sandals.
Don't bother taking an extra jacket or even a backpack.
God will provide what you need
and people will see that so much easier
if you're not dragging a ton of luggage.
And here's what I need you to do:
I need you to preach the good news
that the kingdom has come near...
I need you to heal the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons.
I need you to get out there and do what I'm doing
because I can't do it all myself.
So, go on! Get on out of here!
I can't wait to hear the stories you bring back."

Now, I realize it doesn't happen exactly that way in our church,
but it does happen!
At the end of each service,
with the words of the final hymn still echoing in our ears,
the preacher stands before you,
holds her hands out over your heads and says:
"Go in peace to love and serve the Lord...
Go forth into the world,
rejoicing in the power of the Spirit."
Words that are not addressed to religious consumers.
Words that are not even addressed to disciples.
These are words addressed to apostles... to missionaries...
to all who are sent to be Christian "providers."

The truth is that each week you and I are given
exactly the same things to do
that Jesus himself had been given to do.
"Cure the sick, raise the dead,
cleanse the lepers, cast out demons...
AND... to preach the nearness of the kingdom:
"As you go," Jesus says, "proclaim the good news
that the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Now, that last part may have seemed obvious and even redundant –
I mean, why would anyone who had been cured of disease...

why would anyone who had been raised from the dead
need to be told that heaven was near?
Wouldn't they know that already?

Still, for Jesus it was important for the apostles to SAY something
along with DOING something.

They needed to say what they did
as well as do what they said.

We've all heard that actions speak louder than words...
and many times they DO!

Yet, for Jesus there is real power
when good works are accompanied by good news!

With our actions we can offer the thirsty a drink,
but it's through our words
that they come to know the Living Water.

With our hands we can offer bread,
but only words can give them the Bread of Life.

With all our knowledge and technology
we can do amazing things to heal the sick,
yet it is with words that we have come to know the Great Physician
and it will be with words that we can point others to him.

Proclaiming the kingdom AND acting it out
is what Jesus sends his apostles to do.

What seems so odd, at least it seems odd to me,
is the way he sent them out.

No money... no food... no shoes... no extra clothes...
not even a walking stick.

We talked about this a long time
at our men's breakfast Friday morning.
wrestling with why he would send them out
with so much responsibility, yet so few accessories?

Why give them so much power
and make them depend on the kindness of strangers
for even a cup of cold water?

The only reason I can think of
is that Jesus wanted them to know what it's like
to not only to *talk* about depending on God,
but to *live* depending on God.

that the way he sets this whole project up,
Jesus wants them to provide for others
NOT from what they have earned or accomplished...

NOT from what they bring to the table...
Jesus wants them to provide for others ONLY

out of what they had been given.

Why else would he give them authority to heal the sick
but send them door-to-door looking for spare bed?
Why else would he empower them to raise the dead,
but not to know where their next meal is coming from?
I mean, are they miracle workers or are they beggars?

The answer is they are both.
And this is what I want you all to hear this morning;
They are miracle workers
given extraordinary authority and power.
But they are also beggars,
able to offer only what they have been given.

I realize that when reading a story like this,
our tendency is to establish a safe distance
between Jesus disciples and us.
We convince ourselves
that since they WERE THE TWELVE DISCIPLES
and they DID have JESUS right there with them
that they're somehow different from us...
that we can't do any of those things they did!
And I realize why we do that... at least why I do that.
It's because we feel so inadequate and ill-prepared
to speak about our faith to others.
It's because with some people in some situations
we feel embarrassed by our faith.
It's because we think, "You know, that's why we hire you ministers."

But then I read how Jesus sent these twelve out
with just the shirts on their backs,
yet having everything they needed to do their work.
And I wonder - that day did Peter and Andrew
feel any more equipped than we do?
Did Philip and Bartholomew
get out their notes from the evangelism course in seminary?
Were James and Thaddeus and Simon prepared
for what was going to happen when they got out there?
I don't think so.
I think that taking with them only what Jesus had given them,
they offered what they had.
Because when it comes to being a "provider" of God's love,
there's only one Provider...
one Source who sends us out with nothing at all
yet everything we need: forgiveness, hope, trust, love.

These are the only things we have to share with the world,
and that is just as well,
since they are the only things the world really needs.