

Proper 6A: Matthew 9:35-10:8
Church of the Good Shepherd
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God's Mission Has a Church

I'm going to do something different this morning. I'm going to do what the preachers do in those large megachurches. I'm going to give you a six-point sermon, I'm going to make six points in my sermon. You can write them down in your bulletin if you like. Sorry, I don't have any fill-in-the-blanks for you. But you can manage.

But before getting into those six points, I want to talk a little about megachurches themselves. The rise of the megachurch has been a striking new development, a new phenomenon, perhaps the most significant development in the last fifty years of the church in America. It began back in the 70s with trailblazing churches like Saddleback and Willow Creek, but the model has been copied by thousands of churches since. These large, non-denominational, evangelical churches typically promote themselves as being "seeker-sensitive," meaning they try to appeal to "seekers," the unchurched, by making the church experience as comfortable, inviting, and non-threatening as possible. And they seek to attract people by offering programs and services that meet a need such "seekers" feel they have. Often this means offering something for everyone, for nearly every target group, from Mothers of Preschoolers to Red Glove Motorcycle Riders.

Now, legacy churches like ours have poked fun at these churches and their efforts to remain hip, handing out Starbucks coffee before the service and installing La-Z-Boy recliners in the sanctuary. But really, they're just the extreme end of how a lot of churches act today. You know how it goes. A church tries to reach out to people, to attract them to the church and its ministry by touting all the benefits of being a member. Maybe they can't offer daycare or sports programs like the big churches, but let's say you're concerned about the faith development of your children. They'd say, "Our church has a great children's program. Come join us." Or maybe you're concerned about the state of the world? "Well, our church takes seriously the intellectual challenges of modern people. Come, think with us!" Clueless about the Bible and confused about Christian beliefs? "We can put you in a great Bible study group that will bring you up to speed on scripture." Anything that will get you in the door and make you stick around.

Some years ago I remember seeing a billboard that read, "WE'VE GOT WHAT YOU WANT. COME GET IT." This might as well have been a church advertisement, because the church has become the place where you come seeking, wanting, shopping for something you want. The church exists to meet your needs, we think, answer your questions, solve your problems, and respond to your wants. Sounds like Wal-Mart, doesn't it, one stop shopping!

Trouble is, there's very little in Scripture that supports this supermarket image of the church. Very little that suggests that following Jesus will solve all your problems. Oh, it'll solve some of them, but it'll likely lead to other problems that you didn't have before. 'Cause following Jesus more often than not leads one on a collision course with the values and beliefs of the world! Problems are inevitably going to come up.

But what if we've been going about this the wrong way? What if this approach, seeing Christianity as a cure for "all that ails ya," is wrong? What if that's not the point at all? What if the church isn't the means whereby we get what we want out of God, but instead the place where God gets what He wants *out of us*? What if Christian discipleship isn't the way God meets your needs but rather *we* are the way that God meets the needs of the world's?

Which brings us to this morning's Gospel lesson, Matthew's account of Jesus' sending of the disciples. Up to now, Jesus has been traveling about, doing what he does so well: "teaching, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness." So far so good. But then Jesus does something a bit unusual. He looks at the crowds of people that throng to him and he has "compassion for them"—literally, is moved in his guts—"because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." That's strange because, you know, Jesus is the good shepherd who's been healing and helping them. But, I guess, as much as he's doing, there's still more to do. He needs help. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few," he tells his followers.

This brings us to Point #1: *Whatever good that Jesus wants to do among us, he chooses not to do it alone.*

So Jesus calls the twelve disciples and bestows on them the same healing, helping power that he has been exercising. He takes some of his power, the authority that comes from God, and he gives it to his followers. Matthew makes a point to list their names here. Reading this list, there's nothing that indicates they're a particularly gifted lot. They're a rather ragtag bunch—some fishermen, a tax-collector and a zealot (I wonder how those two got along!). None have any training or qualifications for the momentous work Jesus commissions them to do.

This is point #2: *The disciples are just ordinary folk whom Jesus has given authority to extend his work, to do the work that he is doing.*

But Jesus tells the disciples not to go among the Gentiles or Samaritans (that is, non-Jews) but to focus instead on the lost in Israel. Now, later in Matthew's Gospel—actually, throughout the whole New Testament—we will see the gospel move toward outsiders and non-Jews, but for now, they are to start at home, among those closest to them.

Point #3: *Jesus commissions his followers to go first among their neighbors, those closest to them.*

There's wisdom here. There's no need to go out to foreign lands. First start at home, with your neighbors, those already around us. You know, there are several churches on the south bank—Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist and Disciples of Christ, and none are very large. So we don't have to look far. There's plenty of unchurched people right in our backyard. As Jesus says, "The harvest is plentiful."

And what are Jesus' disciples to do with their neighbors? "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." Sure, that's pretty straight-forward. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons...wait, *what?!?* If we had any inkling that this story of Jesus' commissioning of

the Twelve had any relevance to us today, that assumption probably just went out the window. I mean, when was the last time you heard of someone being raised from the dead, aside from Jesus? And who here has ever cleansed a leper? Let me get a show of hands. Ok, do you know anyone who has? And what are we to make of the whole casting-out-demons thing? Demons... *really*? I know people used to attribute many ills to the work of demons, particularly mental illness, but nowadays the only place you see demons is in horror movies. What with neurology and psychotherapy, MRIs and SSRI drugs, we no longer need supernatural demonic spirits to explain weird behavior.

Now, we can argue about whether that is so. But we just step back a bit from that list of actions, and look at it from a broader perspective, we can nevertheless recognize that what casting them out—and curing the sick, cleansing lepers and raising the dead— all have in common, what they boil down to, is healing and liberation. They concern freeing people from the conditions, ailments, and forces that enslave and oppress them. In case it's not clear, this goes beyond meeting people's "felt needs." They are rather signs of something larger, signs of God's kingdom coming near and God's will being done on earth, when all the other demonic powers, the oppressive forces in the world, the habits and behaviors that enslave us, will be overcome, conquered by the reign of Christ.

That's Point #4. *God's commissions his followers not just to deliver the Gospel, but to witness to God's kingdom becoming a reality on earth.*

Can you guess where I'm going with this? I believe our Gospel today isn't just a historical look back at the work of Jesus and his disciples. This a story about us, about *you*! For reasons known only to Jesus, he has called you and me to be his disciples, his missionaries, a sign of the inbreaking of God's kingdom right here, right now. We are his appointed means of overcoming what's wrong with the world. God has changed us, so we are to "be the change" in the world.

I'm sorry if you came here today thinking that Jesus was mainly about meeting your needs, soothing your aches and pains, answering your questions. Sure, sometimes those good things do occur through encounters with Jesus. But Jesus' typical way of doing good for you is by commissioning you to do good for someone else.

That's the next point, Point #5. *Jesus does good for us by getting us to do good for others.*

Now, Jesus knows we all have needs and desires. But sometimes our greatest needs aren't the ones we know. For instance, maybe you think you need less stress in your life, while Jesus believes what you need most is really to take on another project, to do something else that's meaningful, that feeds you while helping others! I know, you come here to church hoping to receive some gift from Jesus only to have him give you an assignment! Doesn't seem fair, does it?

But to repeat what I said earlier: What if the church isn't the means whereby we get what we want out of God but rather the place where God gets what God wants out of us? What if Christian discipleship isn't the way God meets your needs but rather *you* are the way God meets the needs of the world?

I think the church makes a big mistake when we present the Gospel as the solution to all our problems, as a way to get more of whatever it is that we think we must have in order for our life to go a bit easier. Where Jesus and faith and church are simply add-ons, or helps to get something else—prosperity, connections, peace of mind. Look at today's Gospel lesson. Jesus doesn't greet his first disciples with, "What can I do for you? Tell me where it hurts." No, he says to them, "I'm sending you! Go! Do the same things in the world that I do!"

Thinking about things this way upends how a lot of people think about what it means to be a Christian. If we were to take today's Gospel lesson as our basis, I would say that being a Christian isn't about being able to say, "I believe, I believe all of it, even the part about the miracles." Or, "I've been searching for more meaning in my life and now I've found what I'm looking for." No, according to Matthew, a Christian is someone who has been found by Jesus, who has been assigned a job by him, who realizes that their greatest need is not to have their wants met, their aches and pains soothed, but rather to be a part of something larger, to join in Jesus' mission into the world.

That's our final point, Point #6: *A Christian is a missionary, someone who's been found, commissioned, and made a part of Jesus' mission in the world.* And, notice, that's not just missionaries, those "professional Christians" who sign up to go to some foreign country, but all of us, all Christians, who've been commissioned to carry out God's mission in our own little corners of the world.

Among mission-thinkers today, there's been a recovery of the understanding that mission is not so much what *we* do but first of all what *God* does. It's hard to believe we ever lost this understanding. For in today's Gospel Jesus first preaches, heals, and casts out demons. Then he turns to ordinary people and says, in effect, "I've enjoyed making God's kingdom real for people. Now you try it!"

As it has been put, *the church doesn't have a mission but rather God's mission has a church.* Even though God could accomplish this mission alone, God wants us to be in on it, to participate in mission with Him

I do hope our worship this morning has been edifying for you, maybe even comforting and encouraging, a source of strength and hope. But even more than any of that, I hope this is a time when you get a new sense of the good work that God has called you to do, to embody the coming of God's kingdom. There are people near you, living at your home, or working beside you at the office, even those sitting beside you on the pew, people who need the preaching, teaching, healing, and helping that Jesus has commissioned you to do.

So, as you leave church today, remember that you are the church, you are God's mission, sent forth in Christ's name. Thanks be to God. Amen.