

Proper 9C: Luke 10:1-12,16-20
Church of the Good Shepherd
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A Purpose-Driven Life

I once had a man in my congregation who was a member of what has been called the “Greatest Generation.” He served in the US Army in World War II, and was in the invasion of Normandy and D Day. When we were talking about his war experiences, he spoke of the suffering, the deprivation, the horror of war. But then he said, ““Maybe it’s sad to say, but I look back on those four years as the very best years of my life. For once in my life I really had the feeling that I was part of something, part of something bigger than myself. I was on the move. We had a mission. Maybe it’s sad to say, but I look back on those years as the best of my life.”

“I was part of something bigger than myself.” It’s sad that it was only during a war—amidst deprivation and hardship—that he had a sense of purpose, of being part of something bigger. It’s sad, because it was just that sort of ‘larger purpose’ that Jesus called his disciples to in today’s Gospel.

Jesus sent out seventy of his disciples to go to the towns and villages. And they were sent out “as lambs among wolves,” without supplies, told to accept whatever provision God gave them. Talk about an adventure! When they returned, they were astounded that it worked, that they were able to do the amazing things in Jesus’ name that Jesus himself did. You can almost hear the excitement in their voice. “Lord, in your name, even the demons submit to us!” It sounds something like what my parishioner experienced: they were undersupplied, endangered, exposed, but were having the time of their life, being part of something bigger, part of a movement, working for God’s mission.

Why does it take a war or the Son of God showing up for this to happen, for us to give ourselves to a larger mission? Maybe we should blame the culture, our individualism, our collective preoccupation with personal freedom. It’s hard to find something, anything, people are willing to give their life for anymore. To be sure, few organizations or causes appear deserving of our allegiance these days. We know all too well the compromises and corruption of institutions and political causes. From government to higher ed, the medical field to the church, scandals have become so commonplace we are shocked whenever a person or organization *hasn’t* betrayed its principles. And yet one wonders, even if we did find something worth supporting, what we would do? Would we be willing to submit, to forgo our own whims and will for the sake of a larger purpose, even a divine purpose?

Then again, maybe the blame lies with us preachers, for making following Jesus seem so petty and inconsequential. Too many of us seem content with doing small things — palliative care, institutional maintenance, keeping the denomination afloat, keeping a roof on the church, publishing bulletins for the service, going through the motions. Not to demean any of those activities—they are all important, it’d be hard to operate a church without them. But that’s the

thing. It often seems like we are just “operating the church,” maintaining the status quo, when what Jesus offers us, what he calls us to, is nothing less than a revolutionary raising of the dead.

But I wonder if any of us, clergy or laity, are *really* content with this arrangement. We certainly aren’t excited about it. We do it out of duty, out of respect, out of reverence, even. But rarely do churches operate out of joy, out of purpose, out of a larger mission they are a part of. Church is something some people do on Sunday morning, a kind of hobby, an extracurricular. Others have pickleball or birdwatching or jogging, but for us it’s religion. Something we enjoy, we do on the side. Not something that takes up too much of our time, that demands much of us. We fit it in with all our other commitments and aims—our work, socializing and sightseeing, hauling children around, visiting family, striving for a promotion, saving for retirement, or stewarding our retirement savings. The result is our lives are pretty much booked.

But then we come to God and say, “Hmm. I have five minutes and five dollars left over. I want to be a Christian, so here, God: I’ll give you what I’ve got left.” And we feel fairly noble for it. Now, this last minute, “lowest common denominator faith” may suit our self-centered striving, but as I said, I don’t reckon we are entirely content with it. It doesn’t satisfy. We want something that has depth, power, a challenge, but this isn’t it. Maybe, after decades of longing, we’ve given up, buried that hope deep down inside. But it’s still there, waiting to be summoned, to be called up.

A colleague of mine was visiting a big Episcopal church in San Antonio. The church had established a center for “Faith and Work” in which they try to cultivate ministries among those in the business world. And surprisingly, business people have flocked to their programs of Bible study, theological reflection and discipleship training. When my colleague asked the director what he had learned in his first year of running the program, he answered: “People really want to take their faith with them in their daily work. But the church has done a poor job of giving them the skills and insights to do that. They are more than willing to see their faith as part of their everyday lives, but we don’t do a good enough job of making that connection. That’s where our program comes in.” This church was tapping into a need, a dream of ordinary Christians to turn their job into something more.

Now, contrast that with a conversation another colleague of mine had with a recent college graduate about his desire to be ordained. The young man was an articulate Christian who had been active in campus ministry and deeply influenced by the Episcopal chaplain at his school. He was bright, committed, and knowledgeable about the faith. But as he talked, my colleague grew perplexed. He did not want to serve a church, didn’t think he would like being held accountable to a denominational body, and was not attracted to a ministry of the sacraments. But he did believe he would like to preach once a month or so.

“Then why do you want to be ordained?” my colleague asked him. He thought a while and finally said, “For the identity, I guess. So I could sit down next to someone on a bus who looked troubled and ask them how they were, without them thinking I’m trying to hustle them. So I could walk up to someone on the street and do the same thing. So I could be up front about what I believe, in public as well as in private. So I would have the credentials to be the kind of Christian I want to be.”

This young man's honesty was both disarming and disheartening. God help the church if clergy are the only Christians with "credentials," and God help all those troubled people on the bus if they have to wait for an ordained person to come along before anyone speaks to them!

What this young man's vision of ministry displays is a gross misunderstanding of what it means to be ordained. But it is a misunderstanding that is pretty widespread. Somewhere along the way in the history of Christianity, we got the idea that clergy are the "real Christians," the "professionals." Some suppose that this happened because priests and bishops were eager to grab all the power and authority for themselves. But I think if we are honest, we'd have to admit that it may well have been the other way around—non-ordained Christians were all too happy to shuck their God-given responsibility onto us, so clergy could "be Christian" for them.

And yet, no matter the honors we are given by virtue of our office, we clergy are not solo actors or even the star players on the team. Rather, we should see ourselves as the managers of a potentially winning baseball team, or better as the coaches, actively developing the talents and vocations of our team—you all. One of the great responsibilities of church leaders is, in Paul's words, to "equip the saints." We are tasked with giving people the insights, skills, and faith you need to be engaged in ministry with Jesus.

As the famous preacher P. T. Forsyth said, "The first business of the church is to preach. And the business of the called preacher is to enable the whole church to preach." That is, the purpose of preachers and preaching is to enable you all to do *your* work, to carry out *your* ministry, to help you participate in God's mission in the world. You see, the Church, the body of Christ in the world, is in the business of commissioning. We *call people in* so that we might *send them out* in Christ's name.

Now, people respond to God's call in a variety of ways. Some pursue ordination and others put their pillow over their head. But the vast majority are called to answer God by changing how they live their lives. It can be a frustrating experience, because deciding what is called for means nothing less than deciding what it means to be a Christian in a post-Christian world. Is it a matter of changing who you are — becoming a kinder, more patient, more giving person? Or is it a matter of changing what you do — looking for a new job, becoming more involved at church, or witnessing to the neighbors? What does God want from us, and how can we comply?

In many ways, those of us who pursue ordination take the easy way out. We choose a prescribed role that seems to meet all the requirements and take up full-time residence in the church. We therefore get out of the hard work of straddling two different worlds, while other believers, everyday Christians, have no such luxury. We "collared people" may know where we belong, but you all, the people in the pews, hold "dual citizenship." When you all come together as the church, that is where you belong — in God's country which is governed by love. But when you all leave this place, you cross the border into another country governed by other, less forgiving laws.

A man I know describes the situation this way. "On Sunday morning," he says, "I walk into a world that is the way God meant it to be. People are considerate of one another. Strangers are

welcomed. We pray for peace and justice and healing. Our sins are forgiven. We all face in one direction, and we worship the same God. When it's over, I get in my car to drive home feeling so full of love it's unbelievable. But by the time I've gone twenty minutes down the road, it has already begun to wear off. By Monday morning, it's all gone and I've got another whole week to wait until Sunday rolls around again."

It is not a new problem he describes. What many Christians are missing in their lives, what people innately long for, is a sense of purpose, of mission, of vocation, a sense that there is something, some work they were born to do. Not just clergy, but every Christian, by virtue of their baptism, has a calling, a vocation. To say that is not, I need to assure you, to get you to *do* more—work harder, take on more responsibility—or to *be* more—more giving, more devout. It is rather an invitation to see your life in a new way, to see your work not as a career but as a calling, to see your job not as toil but as service to the Kingdom. Such a view may lead to some changes—taking on new tasks, letting others go—but the point is to bring all that you do and all that you are under a single heading, to give it focus, to direct all your life towards God's larger purpose.

You see, it's not those seventy disciples, but all of us today have been recruited by Jesus into God's mission. We long to be part of something larger, but there is nothing larger, no cause or movement bigger than the Kingdom of God. And God wants us, needs all of us, to be a part of it. God could do it all on his own, we suspect. But out of God's graciousness, He won't do it without us. And for that we say, Thanks be to God!