

Go! Sermon Series

Jesus Sends Out the Twelve – Matthew 10:1-15

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I told you last week about the first sermon I ever preached, back in January of 1997. Let me tell you about the second sermon I preached. I had been in seminary for a few months, still getting my feet wet and dealing with the feeling that I didn't belong there. I was working as a part-time youth minister at a church in Carmel, Ind. I really had no idea what I was doing, but the kids were cool and they paid me, which helped a lot as Leigh and I began our life together.

One Saturday, about 5 p.m., the phone rang. I answered it, and on the other end was the chair of the elders. His first sentence got my attention: "Are you up for an adventure?" It turned out the senior pastor had been skiing in Colorado on Friday and tore up his knee. He was immobilized and unable to travel, so they needed someone to preach. In about 12 hours. With all of one whole sermon's worth of experience, I said, "Sure!" hung up the phone, and started writing my second sermon.

I probably felt about as prepared to do that work as the disciples were in our story from Matthew today. At the end of chapter 9, Jesus had compassion on the people of Israel because they were like sheep without a shepherd, so he says to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." The disciples probably said, "Great idea, Jesus! Go out and get you some laborers," to which Jesus said, "Hey guys, are you up for an adventure?"

Jesus calls together his twelve closest followers, who are listed at the beginning of chapter 10. The list is interesting but not remarkable. These are not heroes of faith. They aren't community leaders or social movers and shakers. They are 12 very ordinary, very imperfect people. You've got a couple fishermen, a Jew who collected taxes for the Romans, a Zealot, a couple brothers, and a man we're told will end up betraying Jesus. And Bartholomew? Thaddeus? I have no idea who they are. None of them were born under a star or announced by an angel choir. And yet, we're told that Jesus called them together and "gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness." In essence, Jesus is taking the work he's been doing and transfers that power to his followers.

Do you remember the first time your parents handed you the car keys? I learned to drive on my mom's old diesel Mercedes, which had a manual transmission. This car went from 0 to 60...eventually, and being a stick shift, it was a difficult car on which to learn to drive. The first time I was behind the wheel was in my high school parking lot. Mom showed me a few basics and then said, "OK, your turn." Really? Can't I watch you for a few more years? So, I slipped into the driver's seat, put my left foot on the clutch and my right foot on the gas, started the car...and immediately stalled it. Three times in a row. Finally, I was able to engage the clutch and move the car into first gear, going about five miles an hour around the parking lot. Mom said, "OK, now you're going to shift into second gear," and I said, "While we're MOVING?!?"

Jesus has just handed the car keys to the disciples, although Matthew gives them a subtle name change. Did you catch that? In verse two, Matthew tells us that these are the names of the 12 apostles. A disciple is a follower, a learner, someone who studies under the tutelage of a rabbi or professor. But an apostle means something entirely different. It comes from the Greek "apostello," which means "I send." An apostle is someone who is sent, someone who is commissioned to do work. Jesus could have promoted the 12 to his assistants, giving them more

of an active role in his work. “Peter, would you mix up some mud so I can heal this blind man? Thaddeus, will you get the Febreze ready for when this dead person comes out of the tomb?” Instead, Jesus elevates them to his status. The disciples are no longer watching from the passenger seat; they are now in the driver’s seat.

Jesus gives them a few pointers as they prepare to head out on the road. He tells them not to take any detours toward the Gentiles or the Samaritans, but to stick with the people of Israel. This directive will change next week when Jesus gives the Great Commission at the end of Matthew, but for now, Jesus is sticking to the script laid out in the Hebrew scriptures. God sent the Messiah for God’s chosen people, the Israelites, so the apostles must first offer the good news to them, telling them that the kingdom of heaven is near. To prove this is true, they are given the power to raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons.

The next set of instructions is curious. Jesus tells the apostles to travel light. They are to take no gold, no silver, no copper, no bag, no extra tunic, no sandals, no staff. They definitely won’t be paying any checked baggage fees. They will take nothing, but instead rely on the kindness of strangers to care for them along their journey.

Doesn’t this seem odd? If the goal is to get people’s attention, to attract potential followers, shouldn’t they roll into town with a little more flair? Maybe riding in a tour bus, speakers blaring, apostles throwing candy out the windows. They could put up some yard signs, hand out bumper stickers, broadcast some negative ads against the surrounding pagan religions. “The Roman gods want to raise your taxes and take away your right to own slingshots. Vote Jesus!” Instead, they arrive in town as inconspicuous as possible, armed with nothing but the good news with which they were sent.

Jesus tells the apostles, “You received without payment; give without payment.” Biblical scholar N.T. Wright translates that line, “The message was free when you got it, make sure it’s free when you give it.” What they have to offer – what we have to offer – is the life-changing news that Jesus loves you, no qualifiers or criteria, just straight-up, free-for-the-asking love. Who wouldn’t want to receive that?

Well, apparently some people. Jesus knew that some people would be receptive to the apostles’ message, offering them food and a place to stay. But others wouldn’t be so hospitable, offering them a scowl and slammed door instead of a warm meal and comfy bed. For the last two weeks, Erica Snow talked with our Sunday School gathering about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, formerly known as Mormons. One of the requirements for people of this faith is a missionary journey when they are in their late teens and early twenties. They are assigned a particular place in the world and must live there for a period of time, spreading the good news of their faith to others.

Can you imagine how many slammed doors they have to endure during their time as missionaries? I always feel sorry for the missionaries who come to my door. First, I already know their chances of converting the Wilcoxon household are pretty small. But I also know they will encounter a lot less friendly faces than ours, all for the sake of being true to their faith. If only we all could be so courageous in living out our faith in the face of challenging circumstances.

That’s why I find Jesus’ words here are so comforting. He says, “If you find a house that is worthy, set up camp there and share your peace. But if anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet as you leave.” What Jesus does here is astounding, because he is basically giving the apostles permission to not fulfill their mission. He’s saying to

them that it's OK to fail, because the success of their work is not completely up to them. If they are rejected, they are simply to move on.

When I played football in high school, I was prone to injury. Well, let me clarify. I was prone to act injured so I didn't stay on the field and get knocked around like a pinball. After a play, I would come limping off the field and the coach would growl, "What's wrong, Wilcoxson?" I'd say, "I'm hurt!" and he'd respond, "Rub some dirt on it and get back out there!"

The healing power of dirt, right? And yet, in the beginning, how does God make the first person? "The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground." Dirt in God's hands has generative power, so when Jesus tells the apostles to shake the dust off, it's as if he's saying, "You may not be able to make anything happen here, but don't worry. God is still creating in this place. You've done what you can do, so it's OK to move on."

There are going to be times when our words, our actions, our attempts to be Christ to someone will simply not be heard. I can think of many Facebook conversations when I've tried to model what I have learned from Jesus about being compassionate, loving, and gracious, only to find that the other person only wants to SHOUT LOUDER to prove they're right and I'm wrong. My human tendency is to SHOUT BACK how wrong they are – with love, of course. But what Jesus says here is, "This is not your fight, so don't make it yours. You've done what you can. There are other people who need to experience God's love through you. Rub some dirt on it and move on."

Sometimes the most Christ-like thing we can do is walk away from a discussion that is pulling us in the wrong direction. If someone wants to bully rather than dialogue, shake the dust off. If someone wants to yell at you rather than talk to you, shake the dust off. If someone is only interested in talking and not listening, shake the dust off. Better for us to walk away rather than become someone we're not called to be. Shake the dust off and pray that God continues creating.

My first church out of seminary was in Lincolnshire, Ill. When I arrived there as the associate minister, we averaged about 110 people in worship. I served for three years as the associate, then was given the car keys and served as five years as the senior minister. I gave that church everything I had, and when I left it eight years later, their average worship attendance was...still about 110. Did I fail that church by not growing it? Was the message I was sharing rejected by those who chose not to join our congregation? I don't know, but I do hope God is still creating in that place.

Like the apostles, we are called to go from this place, taking what we have received here as a free gift and offering it freely to others. Healing, forgiveness, restoration, resurrection – these are the tools we take with us to share. They're really the only things we have to offer, which is just fine, because they are the only things this world needs. We don't need silver or gold, tunics or staffs. All we need is the authority Jesus has given us through the Holy Spirit and a life-changing message of love and grace. As Jesus says in the Message translation: "You don't need equipment. You ARE the equipment." Are you up for an adventure?