

Pray For Workers

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Matthew 9:35-10:8 (NRSV)

Then 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. [36] When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. [37] Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; [38] therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

[10:1] 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. [2] These 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; [3] Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; [4] Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

[5] These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, [6] but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. [7] As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' [8] Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

BEGGING FOR WORKERS

In Matthew 9:37-38 Jesus tells his disciples that since the "harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few" that they should "ask the Lord of the harvest" to send out laborers to help us.

Actually, that translation by the New Revised Standard Version is way too mild. That word translated "ask" means something like "pray, beseech, beg and plead." Once again Peterson gets it right when he translates this verse in the Message, "On your knees and pray for harvest hands!"

I'm with Jesus on this one. As a pastor I have often prayed for more workers. Notice I didn't say that I've prayed for more members. I've prayed for more workers.

The number of members on the church roll is not as crucial as the number of people who are willing to roll up their sleeves and actually do something! We have a big job to do in the church. This job is too big for us to handle, and we need help.

So, what is this big job that we need to do?

According to Jesus it is the work of compassion. In our lesson for today and many times in the gospels the Bible tells us that Jesus was deeply moved by human need. He cared about people who were ill. He cared about people who were hungry and thirsty. He cared about people who were grieving the loss of loved ones. He cared about people who felt overwhelmed by the problems in life and didn't know where to turn.

The Bible portrays Jesus as being overwhelmed by this need. He and his disciples didn't even have time to eat or sleep. His schedule was crazy. In fact Jesus' family became so concerned about his lack of sleep and food that in the gospel of Mark we read that his mother and brothers came to try and take him home for a little rest and relaxation.

We might think about Jesus in terms of the presidential candidates. They travel all over the country, and everywhere they go people want to be near them and shake their hand. The people are looking for answers and guidance. After a few weeks on the campaign trail the candidates look absolutely exhausted. And sometimes they're so confused that they don't even know what town they're in.

It was the same with Jesus. Some thought he might be the Messiah. Some thought that the salvation of God would come through him. But, this kind of adulation takes its toll. Even the Son of God grew weary. He didn't even have time to pray or be by himself. There was always the press of the crowd. He had compassion, but he was also fatigued.

What was the answer?

The answer according to Jesus was to pray for more workers.

A HUMAN PLAN

God's plan of salvation was (and still is) in many ways a very human plan.

It was a human plan first of all because the Word became flesh and dwelt among. The Son of God became a human being, the flesh and blood revelation of God.

And through the work and prayers of this human/Divine representative, a new, very human movement began. Human beings were called to do divine things. Human beings were called to act compassionately and lovingly toward the needy people of the world.

Disciples were called, and soon something that we call the church was formed.

Jesus began this process by calling twelve disciples. This was in some ways a very symbolic act. The twelve disciples represent the twelve tribes of Israel.

It was as if Jesus the Messiah was telling God's people that this was a new beginning. The people of God, the twelve tribes of Israel were lost and scattered like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus would gather together God's people by giving these twelve new disciples the same authority and the power that he himself had demonstrated.

PICKING THE WRONG PEOPLE

There was just one problem. These new leaders did not seem to be the best choices.

I know that many of you are watching the political campaign with great interest. We all have our opinions about who might be best for the job, but I believe that when we finally elect a president the most important decisions will be made soon after he takes office.

When the new president chooses his cabinet, the quality of his administration will be determined by the quality of the people that he chooses for these high offices. If you get the wrong person in a position of power much harm can be done. That's why new presidents usually spend a lot of time and thought when they choose their leaders.

Do you ever wonder why Jesus didn't choose his leaders more carefully? If Jesus was so insightful why did he choose Judas, who betrayed him? Why did he choose Peter who denied him? Why did he choose Matthew, a tax collector who was despised by the people? Didn't Jesus have someone on his staff to vet these people?

We're not certain about the rest of the disciples, but by the way they act in the Bible it seems safe to say that they were, by and large, very average, untrained group with little theological training or personal insight. They were, by and large, power hungry zealots who ran away when real trouble came their way.

Jesus needed help. He needed workers for the harvest. But, it seems to me that he empowered the wrong people.

You'll remember that last week we noticed that the religious leaders of Jesus' day thought the same thing. What was their criticism? He was hanging with the wrong people ... sinners and tax collectors.

What kind of leader, what kind of prophet makes choices like this? They said in effect, "If Jesus is really the Messiah, shouldn't he be a good enough prophet to know when he was in the presence of a really bad sinner?" It sound a whole lot like the same kind of criticisms that have been leveled at our candidates for president this year doesn't it?

If we can judge president by the cabinet he picks and a person by the company he keeps, what does Jesus' selection of these misfit disciples tell us about him? If Jesus is so great, why does he keep picking losers to be a part of his team?

AN ODD TEAM

When I was in high school our physical education class played flag football the first semester. Those who had some experience playing football were captains, and it was our duty to choose our teams. For some reason I got this wild idea when it came time to choose a team. Suppose I choose all the misfits for my team?

So I did it. I choose the slowest, skinniest, most unusual people for my team. I could see the look of amusement and disdain in the eyes of the other team leaders, and I thought to myself after the selection process, "Frank, that was one of the dumbest things you have ever done in your life. This team is going to get trounced."

But, it didn't happen that way. The people that I choose seemed genuinely happy that someone had chosen them. While the other teams fought about who would get to play quarterback, we worked together. We made up for our lack of talent with teamwork.

And much to my surprise some of those slightly built teammates turned out to be elusive receivers, and one was an excellent quarterback. Flag football requires people who have these skills and so this football version of the bad news bears were the champions that year. After all these years I am still amazed at what we able to accomplish.

As a pastor I'm always praying for more workers. And God does send us some people. But, haven't you wondered sometimes why God has given us such an odd team? I know. I shouldn't question the selection process. In this case it wasn't me selecting a team on a whim. This selection process was up to God.

But, I must admit that I wonder what God is thinking when he selects our teams. There are some of us who need a few more star players. All the other teams (congregations) get to have younger, wealthier and more influential players. Why doesn't God give us a break?

I was talking with a member several weeks ago who told me about all the wealthy people in his last congregation. They had a trust fund that enabled them to do wonderful ministries and build impressive offices in New York City. I told him, "You need to tell those guys how great the weather is in Florida and what a wonderful church you have found. They need to come on down!"

A KINGDOM OF THE FOOLISH

I see these characters on TV with their frozen smiles and really bad theology, and I think to myself, “Why in the world do they have all these followers and all this money and power? Can’t the people see that this is a sham?”

Or to pose the question the way it was asked in a book I read long ago, “Why can’t people be happy in the non-electric church?” Do all the churches have to adopt a market driven, consumer oriented model just to survive?

I guess I’m still that quirky contrarian that I was in high school. I still think that who is on your team doesn’t make any difference. What makes a difference is that every member of the team comes to play and that every member of the team is chosen by a loving forgiving God who has His own unique and equally quirky selection process.

In our lesson for today we read that Jesus sent his disciples out on a mission of compassion, a mission in which forgiveness was preached and diseases were healed.

But, it was not a mission that depended upon big bucks. In fact it was quite the contrary. Jesus told his disciples, “You received without payment. Give without payment.”

The kingdom of God does not depend upon money, power or talent. The kingdom of God just depends upon disciples who are willing to take orders, disciples who are willing to roll up their sleeves and go to work out of a sense of gratitude.

One of my favorite passages in the Bible comes from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. In my mind the First Church of Corinth was a big downtown church. Everyone who was anyone went to First Corinth. This was the church that had the money to seek out and find the best preacher, and they did. A silver tongued guy by the name of Apollos was the preacher at that church.

This was the kind of church that had embossed stationary and a huge staff. Anybody who was anybody went to First Church Corinth. They even had arguments about who followed the best preacher and had the most exciting youth program. (Those ancient Corinthians had some nerve didn’t they? I can’t imagine anyone having an argument about that today. Can you?)

But, then this proud church ran into a guy named Paul.

We’ve been studying the Apostle Paul in our adult Sunday school class. And one of the things we’ve learned about Paul was that he wasn’t that great a preacher. Some suggest that he wasn’t that much to look at either ... a sort of balding old man with a hooked nose who was hunched over because he had had one beating too many at the hands of his adversaries.

But, Paul, despite all his faults was the original straight talk express. He told people the absolute truth about themselves and about God. And do you know what he told these proud Christians at First Corinth?

Yes, God did choose you. But, God didn’t choose you because of your fancy preachers or your state of the art sound system. God choose you to prove that the Kingdom of God doesn’t depend upon the power of men and women but upon the power of God. God chose the most foolish, powerless people he could find in order to shame the wise.

(See I Corinthians 1-2.)

If you ever feel tempted to praise this church or any church because of the things we have done or the people who go here, maybe you better think twice about it. God chooses his team based upon different criteria.

God in Christ chose a traitor like Judas, a sinner like Matthew and a coward like Peter. God in Christ chose Paul, an enemy of the church who had trouble speaking, was not very photogenic and had multiple physical problems. God chose some people in Corinth to carry His message and what were they like? According to Paul, not many were wealthy. Not many were born with a silver spoon in their mouth. Not many were politically connected.

And yet it was through the work of these very imperfect saints that we have the gospel today. It seems to me that there is a pattern when it comes to selecting disciples in the Bible. God selects disciples in the same way that I selected that flag football team in high school.

THE WEAK PREACH BEST

God selects the misfits and the people who have been broken by life. God selects people who are overwhelmed by addictions and sorrow. God selects people who have health problems. God selects people who have trouble speaking and the skinny kid who is not very bright or athletic. God selects people who are old and worn out.

Why does God do this? God does it because his Kingdom is all about compassion. God does it because the whole point of His Kingdom is to preach good news to people who haven't heard any good news in a long time.

And weak, broken, sinful and sorrowful people who have been lifted up by the miracle of God's grace in Jesus Christ are absolutely the best people to preach the Gospel.

They preach not because they hope to make a buck or promote themselves as a paragon of virtue. They simply humbly preach the Gospel out of gratitude. It's like that old definition of evangelism. Evangelism is simply one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.

The theologian Karl Barth once said that the church "may become a beggar, it may act like a shopkeeper, it may make itself a harlot, as has happened and still does happen, yet it is always the Bride of Jesus Christ." This is perhaps the greatest challenge to faith, to see the church as Jesus sees it ... as a beautiful bride.

It is all too easy to see the church in a more negative way. The infidelities and flaws of the church are apparent to all. But, it shouldn't come as a surprise to us.

The people portrayed in the Bible are hardly heroes. The Bible doesn't mind painting human beings as they really are ... weak, stupid and with no allegiance to anyone but their own self-interests.

And yet this very human story is also a story of salvation. Somehow, some way God takes the sordid story of human misdeeds and misery and transforms it into a story of amazing grace. And somehow, some way God does the same thing with us. Our very ordinary run of the mill work becomes an inspiration to something greater.

BROKEN GLASS

This past week Tim Russert, the host of NBC's show, Meet the Press died suddenly and unexpectedly while taping a show. Politicians and TV commentators alike were profuse in their praise of Tim. There was always a kind of honesty and down to earth tone to the work he did.

Some analysts said that it came for his blue collar roots in Buffalo. His dad drove a garbage truck in that city, and worked hard all his life. Tim appreciated that fact, and Tim also appreciated the plight of people who worked hard because of what his dad taught him by his actions.

One incident was particularly telling. He said that whenever the “boys” (as his dad called them) would pick up garbage that had broken glass in it, they would often cut their hands. And so in Tim’s household, whenever a glass was broken, they would carefully put it in newspaper and then tape it shut, so that his boys wouldn’t get their hands cut by the sharp glass.

This simple act of compassion and concern was something that influenced and guided Tim throughout his life. No matter how much he achieved or he famous he became he was still the son of a hard working man from Buffalo who didn’t want his boys to be harmed by the broken glass.

Take that as a parable of who we are called to be as disciples of Jesus. We are people who know what it means to be cut by the broken glass of life. We are people who have struggled in many ways. And out of that struggle we preach a gospel of compassion and hope.

No like the disciples who have gone before us we’re not perfect. We will often fail and betray the one who loves us the most.

But, we are just the messengers. We are not the message. And God in Christ has promised to give us power and authority that is not our own. God will bring healing in places and ways that we could never expect. Our job is to just go where we are told to go and do what we are called to do.

The story of God’s grace continues.

At first Jesus limited the mission to the house of Israel, to the twelve tribes of God’s people. But, by the end of Matthew’s gospel, the mission had increased. They were to go into the whole world to preach the gospel and baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

That’s where we come in. We too have been called to tell this message.

Pray for workers because there are a lot of people who need to hear that story. There is a whole world that needs to become a part of this continuing story of compassion and hope.

I wonder whom God will choose next.
Could it be someone like you or me?

Amen.

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