

“Called Together”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
September 10, 2006  
Scripture: Luke 9:1-11

On this day, as we “kick off” a new program year with a new Director of Christian Education and a sanctuary filled with balloons and brass, there is a lot of excitement in the air. People come to church for so many reasons. And on a day like today there is much anticipation. What will this year bring? Will I be welcomed? What is the message and how are we supposed to respond? Does it matter?

The first word I have to offer to each and every one of you is simply, “welcome.” I offer this welcome not just from my lips, or on behalf of the staff or the session or the membership of this church though that is all true. I welcome you in the name of Jesus the Christ, always our host, the head of the church.

The first word to be heard at church ought to be “welcome.” Simple, unadorned, without exceptions or conditions. Welcome. That is the message Jesus offered to the crowd at the end of our story in Luke. And that was the message Jesus instructed the disciples to give when he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God to all the neighboring towns and villages. Welcome, because the kingdom of God is at hand – near us, within us, among us.

This early story about Jesus and the disciples can shed a lot of light on who we are and why we are here. Jesus called the twelve together, Luke says. And he places in front of them an incredible charge. Luke says he “gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.” It is a rather interesting formulation of the tasks of being a disciple – to have power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, to proclaim the kingdom of God, and to heal. Did you know that is what you were signing on for at your baptism? But then Jesus ratchets up the task. Much like on the television shows Survivor or The Amazing Race, in which extra challenges are added to make it interesting, Jesus adds in a few extra rules to make it harder for them. By the way, do all that stuff – but “take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money, not even an extra tunic.” Rely on the generosity of those to whom you go.

I would love to have seen their faces. You want us to do what? And bring nothing with us? It is as though Jesus is saying that everything they need is already within and among them. And if they don’t have it, ask the people they are visiting. It is a no-clutter approach. Life in the kingdom of God is not about stuff, Jesus seems to be saying. It is about the essentials – shared meals, health, fellowship, helping one another.

And they turned the world upside down, if we can trust the Bible. Jesus’ disciples, commoners, really – fishermen and tax collectors and other ordinary folks, believed him when

Jesus said he had given them power and authority. And they went out and shared the good news and healed people.

Reports of their accomplishments spread fast and far and traveled up the grapevine to those who thought they had the power and the authority. Herod, you remember Herod, the one who put John the Baptist to death by beheading? Herod heard the news. And Herod rubbed his eyes and scratched his head, fearing that John the Baptist had somehow come back to life. See the role of rulers is to keep things under control, and grow their power base. And these Galileans, with separate power and authority and their desire to heal and bring good news confounded him. Could it be that that radical John the Baptist was turning things upside down in his, Herod's kingdom?

But it wasn't John the Baptist. And it turns out it wasn't Herod's kingdom. Just Jesus and some ordinary folks who had the audacity to believe that they could do what he told them to do. But it takes trusting other disciples. Following Jesus's commands is a tough enough task that he sends them out "two by two" according to Mark's version of this story (Mark 6:7).

Called together, and then sent out to serve. That is at the essence of why we gather here at church. You can't do this alone.

And that flies in the face of much of what our culture teaches us. Look out for "number one" we are advised. Make yourself as secure as possible, so that you don't ever have to be disappointed when others cannot help you, say financial planners. See someone helpless on the street and we are conditioned to think that it must be their fault and we should roll up our car windows and lock the doors. Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God is at hand by telling instead the story of the Good Samaritan helping a stranger despite the risk. And Jesus sends disciples out two by two, knowing that they are going to face things they cannot handle alone.

And that shapes a vision for the church. That we are called together, and sent out with others. That the church ought to be a place where we aren't a bunch of similar individuals who come together and depart separately, but are called together relishing our differences. People of all ages, trying to live faithful lives. Children wearing balloons on their wrists next to older adults using canes for support. People in every decade of life. Those who have never owned a computer, and those who cannot imagine life without email. Jesus calls into the church people of all ages, every culture and race and imaginable variety. Called together, and sent out to make a difference.

Part of the healing work that is needed in our time is to heal the mistaken notion that we don't need anyone else. To heal the mistaken notion that we are not responsible for anyone else in this world. To heal the wounds caused by artificial barriers and human prejudices by reminding humankind that in the kingdom of God all people are welcomed and needed.

Over the coming months, we have several events here at Central that I think can deepen both our sense of community, and provide opportunities to serve others. Next week you will have the opportunity to see some of them during the Opportunity Fair. On October 8, we will open our doors and extend our hospitality not just to our human neighbors but to pets as well as

we try a blessing of the animals day. And on October 15, we welcome to our pulpit one of the youngest moderators in the history of the Presbyterian Church, Rick Ufford-Chase, who used his term as moderator to exude energy and a desire for the church to move into the future, as well as his passion and experience working on immigration issues on the Arizona Mexico border.

When we talk about the church of the future, it will need to look a lot like that day when Jesus called together the twelve disciples and gave them power and authority to heal, proclaim that God's kingdom was close at hand, and to create networks of hospitality and friendship.

It is not going to always be easy – trying to follow where Jesus leads. There are still Herods ruling in the world – interested and dangerous. And there are still people and places not receptive to this radical message of Jesus. Jesus's final command to the twelve as they got ready to spread his message into the surrounding areas was that “wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving . . . shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

I always have heard that statement as a rather dismissive gesture. Shake the dust off your feet and turn your back on them. But the thing is, once the gospel message starts to get into your blood, it is hard to let go. Like sand from the beach getting tracked into cabins and bathtubs, maybe Jesus knew that the sand would not just blow away, but stick around on their floors, reminding them of the curious visitors they once received.

If the first word from this passage is welcome, and the second, that we need each other, the third aspect of this passage for us is that actions taken now in trying to follow Jesus together can have implications and results that only emerge much later. Go out and proclaim the kingdom of God, but it may take a long time to see any change.

I am grateful to Tom Long, for sharing the story of Grace Thomas. Long describes her as a gentle woman who was raised in the Southern Baptist Church, and then he goes on to say,

Not many people remember Grace Thomas today. . . There was a time, though, when virtually everyone in the state of Georgia knew who she was.

Grace was the second of five children born to a Birmingham, Alabama, streetcar conductor and his wife. When she married in the late 1930s, she moved to Atlanta and took a clerking job in one of the state government offices. Through her work, she developed an interest in law and politics, and she enrolled in a local law school that offered night classes. [Unheard of for a woman at that time].

After years of part-time study, she finally completed law school, and her family wondered what she would do with her law degree. They were shocked when Grace announced that she had decided to enter the 1954 election race for governor of Georgia. There were nine candidates for governor that year – eight men and Grace – but there was really only one issue. In the famous case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* earlier that year, the U.S. Supreme Court had declared that racially “separate but equal” schools were unconstitutional and thus paved the way for the integration of the public schools. Eight of the gubernatorial candidates spoke out angrily against the court's decision. Only Grace said that she thought the decision was fair and just and ought to be welcomed by the citizenry. Her campaign slogan was “Say Grace at the Polls.” Not

many did; she came in dead last, and her family was relieved that she had gotten this out of her system.

But she had not. Eight years later, in 1962, she ran for governor again. By then, the civil rights movement was gaining momentum, and her message of racial harmony was hotly controversial. She received death threats, and her family traveled with her as she campaigned in order to provide protection and moral support. She finished last again on election day, but her campaign was a testimony to goodwill and racial tolerance.

One day, Grace made a campaign appearance in the small town of Louisville, Georgia. In those days, the centerpiece of the town square in Louisville was not a courthouse or a war memorial but an old slave market, a tragic and evil place where human beings had once been bought and sold. Grace chose the slave market as the site for her campaign speech, and as she stood on the very spot where slaves had been auctioned, a hostile crowd of storekeepers and farmers gathered to hear what she would say. [And in words echoing the Apostle Paul] “The old has passed away,” she began, “and the new has come. This place,” she said, gesturing to the market, “represents all about our past over which we must repent. A new day is here, a day when Georgians white and black can join hands to work together.”

This was provocative talk in the Georgia of 1962, and the crowd stirred. “Are you a communist?” someone shouted to her.

Grace paused in midsentence. “No,” she said softly. “I am not.”

“Well, then,” continued the heckler, “where’d you get those gall-durned ideas?”

Grace thought for a minute, and then she pointed to the steeple of a nearby church. “I got them over there,” she said, “in Sunday school.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. The American disease of racism has not been completely cured -- far from it -- but healing has happened as a result of Christians like Grace Thomas and Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King hearing stories in church and living them out boldly.

Who knows what lessons our children will learn today that will shape their lives in deep and lasting ways? Who knows what connections we will begin to make with others seated around us?

Jesus called the twelve together, and sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God. Called together, and sent out to serve. May it be so for us. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (Jossey-Bass, 2004) 133-135.