

“The Jesus Manual for Ministry”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Matthew 9:35 – 10:14

It seems that in this world there are two kinds of people: spectators, and those who play the game. Increasingly, it seems, life is becoming more of a spectator sport. There are video games in which you play tennis on a handheld device instead of going out to the court. Lots of people are closely following political polls and the daily ups and downs of the presidential campaigns without attending local council meetings or even voting. It is easy to sit back and watch the world go by. Sometimes it is easy to sit back and not even watch the world go by. I heard someone say recently that they were in an airplane and the pilot announced that the off to the left side of the plane was the best view possible of the Grand Canyon. He looked out the window and it was amazing. Then he turned and saw that the ten year old sitting next to him did not even look up from the computer game he had been playing since they had hit ten thousand feet!

It is a real problem in our culture. And it has an impact upon our democracy and our neighborhoods and especially our health. Maybe you have seen the large billboards that urge us to go for a walk, or jump rope, or take the stairs. Do something, they urge. Do anything. For ten minutes, three times a day. It seems simple enough, but it is a real problem. There are a lot of people in our culture who are just sitting around watching.¹

And the church can become that way as well. The church as a place to be a spectator. Barbara Brown Taylor says that

In a world that can be hard and scary sometimes, it is tempting to think of the church as a hideout, the place where those of us who know the secret password can gather to celebrate our good fortune.²

The word sanctuary can mean a place of refuge or asylum. Combining our growing spectator attitude and the sense of the sanctuary as a place of rest and refuge, the church can become a place where we go to avoid the world.

I wonder if that is ever how Jesus’ first followers felt. It must have been exciting to watch him do his ministry. It must have been heady to listen to his teachings and watch how the crowd reacted. But there was no listening to Jesus and avoiding the world. What crowds there were! They gathered around, pressing in on all sides.

We are preparing for crowds here in Saint Paul at the end of the summer for the Republican National Convention. There will be all sorts of delegates and dignitaries, of course, but we are also preparing for lots of media, many of whom will be based next door. And we expect that the streets will be filled with protesters. To get a sense of what we might expect, I walked around a bit two weeks ago to watch the lines develop to hear Barack Obama speak at the Xcel Center. It was amazing to see the lines snaking around the streets and across the parks. For

the most part, it seemed good-natured. People seemed to look out for one another, and hold the place in line for people to get some food or stretch their legs. But crowds are not always like that. Crowds can get violent, of course. And sometimes people in crowds are victimized by pickpockets, or get dehydrated or trampled, or are targeted by security forces.

The crowds pressed in on Jesus as he taught. Then, seemingly all at once in our passage, Jesus recognized what the crowds were experiencing. And “when he saw the crowds,” the Gospel of Matthew records, “he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mat. 9:36). These words, harassed and helpless, are stronger in Greek than they come across. Jesus sees the crowds and sees people who are oppressed, downtrodden, beat-up and crushed.³

For Jesus, he saw that the crowds were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. And his compassion takes on an urgency for them as he introduces a new metaphor. “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” As you know, I am a city boy. I’ve lived here in St. Paul and in Chicago and in Atlanta and along the east coast which is increasingly just one big city. I haven’t spent much time on farms. But I know something about harvest time. When the harvest is ready, you need to push to get the crops in. When the harvest is ready, there can be no delays or excuses. When the harvest is ready, the work must be done and everything else takes a back seat. When the harvest is ready, you get all the workers on board to help bring the crops in.

And Jesus realized that he didn’t have to do all the work. He had the disciples with him and together, they could minister to these crowds. And so, following a list of the twelve disciples, listed in pairs,⁴ Jesus gives them their marching orders. It is a manual for ministry. The Jesus manual for ministry. And fairly brief. Up to this point, they had been called disciples. (When we hear the word “disciple,” we are likely to think of it as a specialized Christian word. But at the time it was just a common Greek word that means followers.) But here, at this point in the Gospel, they become “apostles,” another common Greek word that means “ones who were sent.” And now, Jesus decides to send them out to do some of the same work.

And the tasks he assigns are not insignificant! He gives them five tasks: Proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near;” Cure the sick; Raise the dead; Cleanse the lepers; and Cast out demons. And you thought your to-do list looked challenging?! Jesus has been doing all these things already in the Gospel of Matthew and now he is calling upon the disciples to go and do them. The mission of the disciples then and the mission of the church now is to be a continuation of the ministry of its Lord. “The ministry of the church, like the ministry of Jesus, [Tom Long writes] is a comprehensive ministry addressed to the whole range of human need.”⁵

The disciples have become apostles, ones sent to carry on the mighty works of Jesus. And by extension, we, as have been given our marching orders as well. Tom Long asks the question that many of us might be thinking.

But this still leaves unanswered the harder question. To be sure, Jesus healed people, cast out demons, raised the dead, and performed many other mighty deeds, but we are not Jesus.

So how, in the name of heaven, is the church supposed to do what he did? The second point, then, to be made is that the perceptions of our own weakness are accurate. We do not, in fact, have the power to touch lepers or cancer patients and cause them to be healed in an instant; we cannot shout “Be gone!” at the raging forces afflicting a diseased mind and expect the illness to flee; we are not able to stride into a funeral home and, with a word, raise the dead from their caskets.

The point, then, is not that Jesus used to do these mighty deeds, and now that he is gone, we are supposed to try to imitate him and do them, too. The point, rather, is that God . . . is still at work in the world in Christ. . . The task of the church is not somehow to replace Jesus but to join Christ in the work that he is doing in the world.⁶

I thought a lot about these marching orders Jesus gives to the church this week, with the news of the flooding devastation in Cedar Rapids and Des Moines. And how so much comprehensive ministry will be needed in the coming weeks and months to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven is still near, despite the flooding. That the kingdom of heaven is still near, despite the loss of homes and cars and picture albums. And that is just one place that the work of God has already begun.

And the work is heavy and hard. And that same urgency and compassion Jesus felt ought to motivate the church. There is lots of work to be done. Thank goodness we none of us have to do it alone. In Mark’s version of the story (6:7) they are sent out two by two. Here in Matthew’s version, the disciples are listed in pairs. So we don’t have to go alone, though sometimes we may.

You may be wondering why there is so much focus on where the disciples are not to go. Why would Jesus say, “go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 10:5-6)? And what about the command to “shake off the dust from your feet” (Matt 10:14) if the intended recipients are “not worthy” (Matt. 10:13)?

Briefly, I think there are two pieces of understanding for us. First, about going nowhere among the Gentiles but only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. There is a sense, especially in the Gospel of Matthew, of Jesus’ mission starting locally, firmly within Judaism and spreading out only at the end, when he urges them to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:19). Perhaps it was a sense of thinking globally but acting locally, but it seems clear to be framed as an expanding mission.

The second point about this story is really important today. Missionary work must be closely linked with hospitality. Mission is no about forcing something at people who do not want it. And rather than worrying about converting people of other religions, might we not do well to think about the “lost sheep” of our own faith?

We gather here in this sanctuary, and we do indeed find a place of rest and refuge. But here we also encounter the needs of the world. Here we think about Jesus looking with compassion upon the crowds of those who are still harassed and helpless. Those facing

foreclosures. Those hungry for food and a person who will listen. Those who have been evacuated from the flooding in Iowa, who will soon be returning to damaged homes to begin to rebuild their lives.

Here in worship, as we meet friends old and new, and listen for the Word of God, we realize that there is still a sense of urgency. There are still compassionate tasks needing more hands and more skills. We gather here, and sometimes we have the doors shut to keep out the noise from the street. But as Barbara Brown Taylor says, we cannot forget that

“the Holy Spirit comes knocking at the door, disturbing our members-only meeting and reminding us that it is time to share. We are not to be consumers after all, but providers of God’s love, authorized agents sent out to speak and act in Christ’s name.”

In a few minutes we will leave this sanctuary. Don’t leave as spectators who witnessed a good show. Don’t leave as spectators who heard good music. Don’t leave as spectators. Leave as apostles, ones who have been sent. Do something, do anything – do it as one sent out by Jesus. Amen.

¹ See www.do-groove.com for more details about this public information campaign sponsored by Blue Cross and Blue Shield, Minnesota.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997) 151.

³ Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003) 230.

⁴ Tom Long, *Matthew* in the Westminster Bible Companion series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 114. Long says this is “probably a faint echo of the tradition that they were sent out to do ministry two-by-two (see Mark 6:7).”

⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.