

Are You An Answer?

Matthew 9:35-10:8

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

June 15, 2008

Pastor Dave Carver

Those of you who were here last week will recall that we began what may end up being a summertime stroll with Jesus. We looked at a day in his life, and understood something of what he felt his calling to be as the Son of God, the Agent sent by God to proclaim the presence of God in the world.

Today's reading from Matthew really picks that up. When we hear the kinds of words that Adam read, it's easy to feel the excitement that must have been building in and around Galilee. As we look at the narrative, we can see that Jesus really is THE missionary. He is in all of the towns and villages, and he has one central theme. Does anyone remember what the central message of Jesus' preaching is? If you had to boil Jesus' ministry down to seven words, what might they be? *The Kingdom of God is at hand!*

And here, Jesus is the Kingdom. He is teaching and curing and loving... We read that he had compassion on the crowds. Why? Because they were, to use the Greek, ερριμμενοι. Literally, that means that they were "thrown to the ground and helpless." They were, to use a metaphor that means virtually nothing to most of us in the City of Pittsburgh, like "sheep without a shepherd."

Do you see many sheep around here? Come on a bike ride with me, and I'll show you – there are a few on a property out in Collier that Kelly and I rode past on Wednesday. And these were sheep without a shepherd. Which means that when Kelly and I came whizzing along on our shiny mountain bikes, they panicked and scattered. If a flock of sheep is in a meadow and they don't have a shepherd, then those sheep are on the edge. They are afraid of the shadows in the sky, they are attacked and nipped by stray dogs, and they eventually get so scared and so worn down from being on their guard the whole time that they just crash and literally can't move, because they don't have the energy.

Hmmmm. Stressed. Worn out. Spent. Frazzled. ερριμμενοι. Know anyone like that? Sheep without a shepherd...

Sheep who have a shepherd, though, spend a lot of time eating. Why? Because they don't have to be on edge. They hear the voice of the shepherd. They trust the shepherd. And so whether it's a stray dog or a crazy pastor on a mountain bike, sheep with a shepherd don't panic. They know that they are going to be all right.

So Jesus walks around Galilee, and he does this teaching and preaching and healing, and he looks at his followers, and he says, "Wow, there sure is a lot to do, isn't there? Wouldn't it be great if God sent more people like me?" And the disciples beamed. And Jesus said, "In fact, let's pray that God will send more people like me – more people who are eager and able to proclaim and live

the nearness of the Kingdom of God.” And the disciples smiled and three or four of them said, “Amen! Let’s pray now, Jesus! Go ahead, God, send ‘em!”

Oh, you’ve got to like Jesus. He pulls out the oldest trick in the *Messiah’s Handbook*. The old bait and switch. He’s like the pastor who stands up in front of the congregation and says, “I’ve got good news and bad news. The good news is that we already have enough money to do all of the building renovations we’ve got planned.” And the congregation whoops it up and shouts out, “Praise the Lord!” But before the din dies down, the preacher continues: “The bad news, however, is that most of it is still in your pockets.” Oh. Listen to what Jesus says to the disciples right after they pray for God to send more workers into the harvest field:

And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity. The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zeb’edee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Good News, guys! God heard your prayers! God is sending more people to do what I’m doing! And you know what? It’s you! You’re the answer!

And you can almost hear the wind going out of the disciples’ sails. “Us? Who are we? We were hoping for someone, you know, holy or powerful. Us?” And Jesus looks them square in the eye and says, “You.” Jesus does not call people who are already perfectly able to do what he’s sending them to do; he provides the people he calls with everything that they need to get the job done.

Albert Barnes, writing on this passage more than a hundred and fifty years ago, considers the makeup of the team that Jesus has assembled:

Their office was clearly made known. They were to heal the sick, cast out devils, raise the dead, preach the gospel. They were to be with him to receive his instructions, to learn the nature of his religion, be witnesses to his resurrection, and then to bear his gospel around the globe. The number twelve was the best number for these purposes that could be selected. It was sufficiently large to answer the purposes of testimony, and it was *so small* as not to tend to disorder...They were not *learned* men, and could not be supposed to spread their religion by art or talents. They were not men of wealth, and could not *bribe* men to follow them. They were not men of rank and office, and could not *compel* men to believe. They were just such men as are always found the best witnesses in the courts of justice – plain men, of good sense, of fair character, of great honesty...such

men everybody believes, and especially when they are willing to lay down their lives to prove their sincerity.

You see, that sounds good when Dr. Barnes writes it, but the truth is that it's an unlikely group. A Tax Collector and a Zealot? A patriot and a traitor? A grizzled old fisherman and a young kid? I don't know, Jesus. This'll never work. You might want to start with one demographic, and then build up from there. After all, if we have teens and seniors, right-to-lifers and those who aren't so sure, blacks and whites, Democrats and Republicans, men and women...aren't we just asking for trouble?

Nope. Remember the prayer. We're not asking for trouble, and we're not asking for more people like us. We're asking for people who look and act like Jesus. We're asking for people who will do what Jesus does.

And as if to underscore this, note that when Matthew relates the story of the calling, he says that Jesus calls them in pairs: Peter *and* Andrew; James *and* John, Philip *and* Bartholemew...You see? Never alone!

And what is he calling them to do? Let's listen to Matthew one more time, this time, however, I want you to hear it from the translation of the New Testament called *The Message*:

Jesus sent his twelve harvest hands out with this charge:

"Don't begin by traveling to some far-off place to convert unbelievers. And don't try to be dramatic by tackling some public enemy. Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighborhood. Tell them that the kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out the demons. You have been treated generously, so live generously.

"Start right here in the neighborhood," Jesus says.

Let me say a word to those of you who are graduating this year, or who are on Cross-Trainers staff for the summer. This is the kind of passage that folks in your situation hate to have read on days like today. Jesus is sending out these folks to do all of this world changing, and you hear it and you respond by saying, "Whoa, whoa, whoa Pastor Dave! Hold on just a cotton-picking minute now. Who are you kidding? I can't do this stuff? I'm just a kid, for crying out loud! I'm just starting out! I'm just...I'm just..."

Give me a break. Who are you NOT to do this? Why can't you treat people this way when you serve them at Giant Eagle or at Lowe's? Why can't you love people when you are studying up at Westminster or teaching their children or babysitting them or helping to build their home? You know the truth, young people: there is no part in your life where you cannot show or tell people

¹ *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament, Vol. 1* (London, Blackie & Sons, n.d.), p. 107.

that the Kingdom of God is here. You don't need special qualifications, and you sure don't need to work here in order to do that!

And one more thing, young people: this is the kind of passage that the other folks *love* to have read on a day like today. I read that, and I lay into you about following Jesus in your work and in your play and as you live your daily lives, and these folks say, "You tell 'em, Rev! The church needs more people like that! Get them, Dave! Tell them that they can follow him!"

Exactly! The church does need more people like this. I'm glad you're here, older folks! You're not off the Kingdom hook just because you've finished school or turned forty or become a grandparent! Who are *you* not to proclaim the Kingdom of God in your actions and with your words? This is not an invitation to a few folks who are good enough, young enough, old enough, smart enough, or rich enough to follow Jesus. This is an invitation for all who want to follow!

You may have seen the recent film, *Akeelah and the Bee*. That film repeats a quote that is sometimes attributed to Nelson Mandela, but is actually by Marianne Williamson:

You are a child of God: Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There is nothing enlightening about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us.²

On a warm spring day in Galilee, probably in the year AD 27 or 28, an itinerant Jewish Rabbi – a former carpenter – named Jesus, from Nazareth, a man who spent his entire ministry proclaiming the nearness of the Kingdom of God, a man who was love and hope and justice and grace and peace, this man called his followers to him and said, "Pray – pray that God will send people who are willing to live like the Kingdom of God is important." And God's people have been praying ever since.

Has God answered this prayer? Has God sent laborers into the fields?

Look around you. Look in the mirror. You tell me: Has God answered this prayer? Are you the answer? Amen.

² *A Return To Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles* (Harper Collins, Chapter 7, Section 3) 1992.