

“The Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind”¹

Romans 10:14-17, Matthew 9:35-10:9

February 27, 2022

Collegiate Presbyterian Church

Introduction to the Series

Over the past two weeks, our Mission Study Task Force has helped us “look in the mirror” and “look out the window.” Allow me to once again thank Cynthia Honeycutt, Melvin Meares, Sarah Shumate, and Shirley Thomason for their excellent work. This morning, Heather and I begin a series of sermons on the “Great Ends of the Church.” Another word for “ends” might be “purposes” – the Great Purposes of the Church. Beginning with Scripture and drawing on our Reformed theological tradition, these six statements attempt to put down on paper what the church of Jesus Christ is for. Though I admit that the language is a bit dated, the wisdom in these old words is not. And when the church chooses to live toward these Great Ends or Great Purposes, there may be no place you would rather be than among these already/not yet people. The first great end of the church is this: The church exists for the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.

Romans 10:14-17

¹⁴But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” ¹⁶But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” ¹⁷So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

Matthew 9:35-10:9

³⁵Then 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. ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

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

¹ This sermon is adapted from Barbara Brown Taylor’s “Heaven at Hand,” published in *Bread of Angels* (Cowley, 1997), 151-155.

⁵These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ ⁸Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. ⁹Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, ¹⁰no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food.

Sermon

In a world that can be hard and scary, it’s tempting to think of church as a hideout – the place where we retreat to feel safe and secure. When your responsibilities at home or work sap every bit of energy you have, it’s tempting to see church like a gas station that you pull into each week to fill your tank. And in a culture that has shaped us into such good shoppers, it’s tempting to think of ourselves only as consumers of God’s love. But then one day the Holy Spirit comes knocking at the door to remind us that Jesus doesn’t mean for us hunker down in here, but to get out there... and that we’re not meant to be consumers of God’s love ONLY, but also, providers of that love.

And whether he meant to our not, Matthew gives us a clue to this when in one verse he writes: “And Jesus summoned his **disciples** and gave them power...” and in the very next verse announces: “These are the names of the twelve **apostles**...”² Now, you and I might think this is just splitting semantic hairs... that the words “disciple” and “apostle” mean the same thing, but we would be wrong, I think. You see, in the Bible disciples are those who follow, apostles are those who lead. Disciples are students, apostles are teachers. Disciples hang on every word that comes out of their rabbi’s mouth, apostles take their rabbi’s words and give them to others.

So, it had to come as quite a shock that day he did it. I mean, there you are, perfectly content to be a **disciple**... sitting at Jesus’ feet... soaking in everything he has to say... growing in understanding and commitment... when one day Jesus comes home all worn out, and with no warning looks around and says, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. I need some help, and I’m sending you.” And then, he holds his hands over your heads and prays and all of a sudden, IT’S YOU who has authority over demons and disease and even death. And just when you go to say, “Thanks, Lord, but no thanks,” he starts calling your names: “John and Jean, you see if you can start a Bible study in your neighborhood. Sarah and Joe, how about you see what the needs are at the high school? Bill, could you maybe reach out to some of the business people in your building. And Cathy and George, I’m thinking you would be great with young couples.” So, go on! Get on out of here! I can’t wait to hear the stories you bring back.”

Now, I realize it doesn’t happen exactly that way in our church, but it does happen! At the end of each service... with the words of the last hymn ringing in our ears... we are sent out into the world to do exactly the same things that Jesus himself had been given to do.

² Matthew 10:1-2

“Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons... AND... to proclaim the nearness of the kingdom: “As you go,” Jesus says, “proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Now, maybe we’ve heard this kind of Jesus story so often that we miss how truly remarkable this is. I mean, it didn’t have to be this way. Jesus could have pointed out that not one of them was the Son of God... none of them had been born under blazing star with angels singing over their crib... not one of them had the heavens open and the Spirit of God bless them at their baptism. He could have reminded them of all that, but he didn’t! And this is where we come to the first great end... the first great purpose of the church – the PROCLAMATION of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind. You see, for Jesus it was important for his apostles to SAY something about the things that they were DOING. They needed to say what they did as well as do what they said. We’ve all heard that actions speak louder than words... and many times they DO! However, there are times when silent witness is not enough... times when actions alone are not complete and only a word will do.³

The thing is that we are not born knowing how to talk about our faith. It is not second nature for us to know how to tell God’s story amid all the other stories unfolding around us. And even as we grow in faith over many years, some of us... perhaps many of us... still find it challenging to speak God... to actually say something about what our faith means to us. Which means, friends... that if you and I want to take our part in this first great purpose of the church, two things are needed.

The first is practice. Like we said, we aren’t born knowing how to talk about our faith... so this ability has to be acquired and learned through experience. And let’s not forget... this was true of Jesus as well. Jesus, like all other faithful people, had to grow in wisdom and ability.⁴ And where did he do that? He did it in two places – his home and his synagogue. We all remember how he dazzled the temple leaders with his understanding and questions – he was learning how to speak faithfully. And it’s the same for us – we learn to speak of faith in our homes and in our church. In fact, one way to think about our homes and church is as a “language school of God,” as places where we can learn to speak God.⁵

The second thing we need if we are to take our part in this first great purpose of the church is to fully rely on God... to trust and depend on God completely. I think that’s why Jesus sent these guys out with no money or luggage or hotel reservations... not even a walking stick. Why else would he give them so much responsibility, and so few accessories? Why give them so much power and then make them dependent on the kindness of strangers for their next meal? The only reason I can think of is that Jesus wanted them to know what it’s like to fully rely on God... to not only **talk** about relying on God, but to **live** relying on God.

³ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian* (Jossey Bass, 2004) p. 25.

⁴ Luke 2:40

⁵ Long, p. 32.

In one of her sermons, Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a friend who spent time in Cambodia where he learned about a Buddhist custom that seems to have something to do with this story. According to him, all seekers of the truth there spend at least a year of their lives as beggars... as beggars. They go from village to village wearing nothing but a saffron robe and owning nothing but a begging bowl. After that year is over, they are free to return to their former life, but as you might guess, none of them returns the same person. What must it be like to own nothing and to understand that the only thing you have to offer anyone else is what you yourself have been given?

This makes me think of that old definition of evangelism: that “evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.”⁶ When we proclaim the gospel... in whatever way we do that... we are just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. And when we think about it that way, maybe... just maybe... it doesn’t sound so daunting. Sure, you and I feel inadequate and ill-equipped to proclaim the gospel... especially when words are involved. But then I read how Jesus sent out these twelve average guys and I think “Hey, we’re in good company!” Do we actually think that Peter and Andrew felt any more equipped than we do? Did Philip and Bartholomew get out their evangelism notes from seminary? Were James and Thaddeus and Simon prepared for what was going to happen when they got out there? I don’t think so. I think that they took only what Jesus had given them... and they offered only what they had. Because when it comes down to being a “provider” of God’s love, there’s only one Provider... one Source who sends us out with nothing at all yet everything we need: forgiveness, hope, trust, love. These are the only things we have to share with the world, and that is just as well, since they are the only things, the world really needs.⁷

⁶ Attributed to D.T. Niles

⁷ Taylor.