

“Sent to Serve”
Mark 6:1-13

7/9/06

"Reviewing the Gospels... [a pastor] was astounded at the number of times Jesus sent his followers out to do something. The record is punctuated with these orders. Go preach. Go tell. Go work. Go into the highways. Go to the next town. Go into the country. Go to the other side. Go into the deep. Go into the streets. Go into the city. Go into the village. Go to the lost sheep. God call your husband. Go make it right with your brother. Go and learn. Go quickly. Go in peace. Arise and go!"ⁱ Even the word *apostle* means one who is sent.

"He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two..." In the law of Moses, one witness was not enough to substantiate testimony. Two were required.ⁱⁱ And Jesus said that where two or three are gathered in his name he is there.

They aren't supposed to go alone but together because, as Jesus' disciples, they're not just individual followers, but they're members of a *community* of faith and representatives of the whole church.ⁱⁱⁱ

"...[He] gave them authority over the unclean spirits." Just as Jesus had power to exorcise the evil that destroys the life God meant us to live, he gave his disciples authority to challenge the powers of darkness.

"He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts..." Like Jesus, who depended only on God to provide, his followers are supposed to depend on God alone to give them everything they need through the hospitality of others. Their only possessions are a staff, a tunic and sandals.

"He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place..."

Since Jesus never asked for anything for himself, he expects his disciples, sharing his mission, to do the same, not hoping they can upgrade to more comfortable accommodations, but accepting hospitality from whoever offers it first.

"If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."

It was the practice of faithful Jews returning from Gentile territory to shake off the dust as symbolic way of shaking off any ritual pollution they might have brought back with them.^{iv} "It was [also] the custom in Palestine [for] hosts [to] wash the feet of [their] guests as a symbol of acceptance and hospitality. If hosts refused to wash dust from the guest's feet, the remaining dust became evidence that condemned the host as inhospitable."^v

When the messengers are rejected, they're not supposed to curse or vow revenge, just shake off the dust from their sandals as a symbolic act to let those who reject them know that, whether they hear or refuse to listen, a prophet has been among them.^{vi} Their fate is left in God's hands.

"So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." They

preached the same message Jesus preached, they experienced the same rejection, and they shared his compassion and his power to heal.

But what does the story of the sending of the twelve apostles have to do with us today? I think it tells us some very important things about us as the church. We tend to think our work is maintenance, not mission. But, as the theologian Emil Br nner once said, "The church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning."

A church without a mission isn't really a church. "...Far too many churches are like a fishing lodge where nobody fishes" ^{vii} [anymore].

You may have heard this story, "On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea and, with no thought of themselves, went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved and various others in the surrounding area wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely because they used it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in this club's decorations, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that seacoast

today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.^{viii}

Even if we're not lost in our own comfort or institutional concerns, sometimes we think we've got to wait until we've carefully studied and discussed and refined our mission statement and have become expert in the scriptures before we can go out into the community and the world to do mission. But look at the disciples. In Mark's gospel, especially, they're a sorry bunch. They never seem to get the point of Jesus' teaching. They're forever vowing unswerving loyalty but proving themselves faithless when the chips are down. But Jesus chose them and sent them anyway, faults and all.

Our culture worships the individual. But Jesus sent them in pairs, because two are better than one. We remain silent in the presence of evils that destroy lives around us. Jesus gave them authority to name evil and banish it.

Like I did when I went to the Holy Land the first time, most of us take a whole lot more than we need when we travel, and the excess baggage weighs us down. But Jesus told his disciples to travel lightly, carrying only the bare necessities. We usually think first of our own comfort, and only second of the needs of those we're sent to serve outside these walls. Jesus told them to be content with whatever hospitality was offered. We're so hung up on success and so afraid of risking disapproval that we're immobilized. Jesus told them to *expect* rejection and failure and just move on and begin again. We seldom take a critical look at ourselves before we express our opinions about how other people need to change. Jesus sent his friends out to preach a repentance that changes the lives of messengers and listeners alike.

Still, Jesus sends us on a mission - in spite of our faults and failures, in spite of our fears. Jesus preached forgiveness and practiced compassion. His reward was the cross. He knew the pain of rejection - by his own people, his neighbors, family and friends. He expected his disciples to experience it, too. But instead of giving them a curse to speak or the power of revenge, he gave them what could almost be called a "sacrament of failure",^{ix} shaking the dust from their feet.

Those who will not welcome the messenger or listen to the message bring condemnation on themselves, not on the messenger or the message. God will have the last word.

"The word *absurd* comes from [a Latin word] meaning *absolutely deaf*." It isn't the Gospel message that's absurd, but those who refuse to listen to it.^x That could even include us. Someone said that if Jesus had come today, most people would probably just ignore him, just as many of us Christians do today.

"Alice Walker [author of *The Color Purple*] has a collection of stories about a young black girl growing up in the South called *Meridian*. One vignette in the novel is about gold. It tells how the heroine, Meridian, one day found a large chunk of heavy metal covered with [corrosion]. Meridian takes a large file and scrapes away the many layers... that surround the metal. To her amazement, she finds that her possession is a bar of yellow gold. She rushes home to her mother who is sitting on the back porch shelling peas. 'I've found some gold!' she shouts, 'gold!' And she places the large heavy bar on her mother's lap.

'Move that thing,' her mother says sharply. 'Don't you see I'm trying to get these peas ready for supper?'

'But it's gold,' she insists. 'Feel how heavy it is. Look at how yellow it is. It's gold, and it could make us rich!' But her mother is not impressed. Neither is her father, or her family, or her friends. Meridian has something wonderful to share, but she is rejected. No one is interested in sharing her joy. [No one would listen.]

So Meridian took the bar of gold and put in a shoe box and buried it under the magnolia tree that grew in the yard. About once a week she dug it up to look at it. Then she dug it up less and less....until finally she forgot to dig it up at all."^{xi}

We have this treasure in a shoe box. We have this treasure in a building that's always in need of some repairs or improvement that cost money. "We have this treasure in clay jars," Paul said. We have this treasure in bodies that are young and eager and bodies that are old and worn. We have this treasure in people who work hard and people who feel they've done their part and are too tired to do more. We have this treasure in ordinary, flawed people like you and me. It's not gold, it's the good news, the joyful news of God's love in Jesus Christ. But when people won't listen, when our joy in finding it is rejected, we bury it, only to go dig it up once in a while. Finally, we forget about it and how it could change our lives and our world.

"[The word] *Obedience* [comes] from a Latin root *obaudiens* [as in audio and audience] which means 'to listen thoroughly.'^{xii} Those who really listen to the Gospel don't just hear it but also go and do it.

But "The modern church[, says Peter Hammond,] is like a soccer game: there are 22 players who work furiously, badly needing rest. Ten thousand fans sit watching, badly needing exercise."^{xiii}

"J.B. Phillips[, author and Bible translator,] once wrote, 'The real danger to professing Christians lies not in the more glaring and grosser temptations and sins, but in a slow deterioration of vision, a slow death to daring, courage and willingness to adventure.'^{xiv}

The world doesn't stand still. It changes. Jesus sends us out into that changing world. He tells us to just leave behind the baggage that'll only weigh us down, to leave behind the concern for our own comfort that will only discredit our mission. All we need to take is the authority he's already given us, a trusting faith, and an openness to the new things God is doing in the world – with or without us.

When he sends us where we'd rather not go. When both message and messenger are rejected. When all that's familiar and comfortable changes and everything around us seems rootless, even then all will be well if we are rooted in God.^{xv}

"A legend tells that after Jesus returned to heaven at the ascension, the angels asked Him who was continuing His ministry. He said that he had left his disciples in charge. An angel asked, 'But what if they fail?'

Jesus replied, 'I have no other plan.'^{xvi}

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- ⁱDaniel Walker, Mimeographed sermon, 1963, in *Windows to Truth* 8:3 July/August/September 1988, 3.
- ⁱⁱDeuteronomy 17:6 and 19:15.
- ⁱⁱⁱLamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 119.
- ^{iv}Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 120.
- ^vAnne Perry-Daniel, *Emphasis* 18:2, July 1988, 19.
- ^{vi}Ezekiel 2:5
- ^{vii}Lloyd Ogilvie, *Windows to Truth* 12:1 July/August/September 1991, 4.
- ^{viii}"The Parable of the Life-Saving Station," Theodore Wedel, as quoted in *Howard Clinebell's Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling*.
- ^{ix}Leonard I. Sweet, *Homiletics* 6:3 July-September 1994, 4.
- ^xWilliam Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 22:3 July, August, September 1994, 6.
- ^{xi}*Celebration* July 3, 1988, in *Windows to Truth* 8:3 July/August/September 1988, 2.
- ^{xii}William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 22:3 July, August, September 1994, 6.
- ^{xiii}*Windows to Truth* 13:2 April/May/June 1992, 4.
- ^{xiv}*Windows to Truth* 11:2 March/April/May 1990, 12.
- ^{xv}Cf. prayer of St. John of the Cross, in Leonard I. Sweet, K. Elizabeth Rennie, *Homiletics* 3:3 July-September 1991, 10.
- ^{xvi}"Stories: Some Old, Some New," Bonus, *Windows to Truth* 15:3 July/August/September 1994.