

## Sermon: July 12, 2020 – Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Watch at <https://youtu.be/Sq3zkkKRyu0>

So much of our energy as a Church community, needs to go into being an open, inviting, welcoming host. Especially with the commitment we have made as an Affirming Ministry, we are to ensure that any and every person arriving at the Church door experiences a genuine welcome, with visible signs of welcome and the removal of any obstacle to their full inclusion and participation in the life and work of the congregation. This remains important work to us, even as today's gospel reading focuses on a different aspect of discipleship.

Today's gospel reading is about being "sent." It's not that Jesus doesn't want us to be gracious and generous hosts, but that's not the task at hand in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. To be honest, other than a couple of safe homes in Capernaum, and the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus at Bethany, "home base" was never a huge reality for Jesus and the disciples. Their life was shaped much more by being a traveller on a mission, travelling light, learning to be emissaries of a new way of being.

It's an energetic little account, this reading from Matthew: the group of 12 being are portrayed as workers bringing in the harvest and shepherds securing the safety of the sheep. If we were to read the entire scene, which continues another 34 verses, we'd hear about travelling without money or knapsack or overcoat, the need sometimes to just move on to the next town, predictions about family divisions, and wise advice to be "as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves." (v.16). From all this, there are 3 things I'd like to highlight.

First, I am struck, by the mission they were given. While eventually they would be going into unknown territory, at this point Jesus directs them to restore health and wholeness and to confront the powers of evil closer to home, with folks who would likely be none too happy with an upsetting of the status quo. While the mission is stated in very physical, even "medical" terms, this healing mission is the engagement, in God's name, of a world that is not experiencing Shalom. This mission, is nothing short of the proclamation of a new world order: a place where we actually want healing of relationships, rather than brokenness; a place where we actually lift up ways of thought and action that are healthy and life-giving, rather than being controlled by compulsions and addictions and self-centredness; a place where we are restored to harmony with one another and all of creation. As we hear of these twelve being commissioned to be about these things, we would do well to ask ourselves about how many of these things we actually want? Do I want to be reconciled with those I have wronged, or who have wronged me? Am I honestly willing to acknowledge my privilege, and be a positive ally for the establishment of new ways of justice? *Am I willing to upset my own applecart?*

Second, I am struck by how personal these verses are. This is where Matthew lists the twelve disciples by name. The fact that us readers are given their names, suggests to me that each one of them likely had a face-to-face with Jesus, preparing them specifically for what they would need to be about whilst on the road: Matthew, don't be giving investment advice; Peter, don't do anything rash; Judas Iscariot... well... Judas, be careful of who you befriend.

There is something so powerful about being named: not just, “hey you, hit the road” but “James – John – Joanna – Jane – go with the Spirit, bring wisdom and blessing and love.” By naming names, there may well be an implied invitation here, to add other names to the list, too – mine, yours, ours as a community of faith – as we state our willingness to be disciples of Jesus.

Matthew lists the disciples’ names in pairs, and while he doesn’t explicitly say so, the gospel of Mark, when telling the same story, does explicitly say that the disciples were sent out two by two. Mark Roberts, writing on the Fuller Seminary website, has a good take on this: “Why did Jesus send out the disciples in pairs, rather than individually?” he wonders. “Wouldn’t individuals be able to cover much more ground much more efficiently?”

“Part of the answer lies in the Jewish tradition of ‘two witnesses [in order to convict someone]. (Deuteronomy 19:15).... So when two of Jesus’ disciples proclaimed the presence of the kingdom, they would be more likely to receive a hearing.” Mark Roberts makes the side comment: “Of course it wouldn’t hurt their credibility if they cast out demons or healed the sick!”

He continues: “There may be another reason why Jesus sent out his disciples in pairs. He may have been thinking of the power of shared ministry, the added impact when two or more people work together toward a shared goal. This co-laboring is not only effective, but also a reflective of the theological nature of ministry in the era of the new covenant. By sending his disciples out two by two, Jesus foreshadowed the collegiality that would become the hallmark of the Spirit-filled church.”

Which brings me to the third and final aspect of this scripture I’d like to lift up today: the ways we are sent into the world in Christ’s name.

Thirteen years ago, I was trained how to design, upload, maintain and improve a website. My first effort was plain but comprehensive, a flat HTML site with page after page of organized information for our school of 1,000 students. What I remember most about that, was after 10 months of training and planning and assembling information, the day arrived when I could finally press the “SEND” button to make my site go live to the world. My index finger must have hovered over the keyboard for twenty minutes before I had the gumption to hit the button, because I knew that once I hit that button, I could never take it back. “Send” only has one direction, and that’s “out.” (Note to Facebook and Twitter and Instagram users, this applies to you, too – once you put it out there, there’s no taking it back, no matter how hard you try to erase the evidence!)

I share this now, because for me, in these days when we are still physically moving out into the world very tentatively, we are still being sent into the world to do Christ’s mission. Church life online is a powerful opportunity, IF we perceive ourselves as being SENT. When we post our service online, it’s not just local folks we are speaking to, and we know this by the responses we receive from other congregations and communities and continents. (And once more, “hey, Pinawa MB Christian Fellowship, so glad you could join us today.”) While it may seem like we are withdrawing by reducing physical presence to one another and going online, I have a strong sense of “being sent” in this Ministry, and I hope that speaks to you as well.

For even as we refrain from meeting in person, we continue to be commissioned by Christ. Our Church Committees are still meeting – mostly by Zoom– and a network of nearly twenty Care Contact phoners have been diligently and lovingly contacting our congregation, and I owe them a huge debt of gratitude for doing so. Ever-adapting government regulations need to be studied and learned and applied by our Worship Committee and Church Council, as a recent Zoom marathon can attest to. Rather than enumerating everything, may it suffice to say that the team effort at Ralph Connor continues, even if the team is presently connected by phone or tablet or computer or by hearts joined in prayer. Even as we have been physically distanced from one another, our heart-and-spirit connection is still strong, for we are still the Church, the body of Christ! As was written many weeks ago by the Bishop-elect of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Missouri, Deon K. Johnson:

"The work of the church is essential.

The work of caring for the lonely, the marginalized, and the oppressed is essential.

The work of speaking truth to power and seeking justice is essential.

The work of being a loving, liberating, and life giving presence in the world is essential.

The work of welcoming the stranger, the refugee and the undocumented is essential.

The work of reconciliation and healing and caring is essential”.

Bishop Johnson continues, “The church does not need to ‘open’ because the church never ‘closed’. We who make up the Body of Christ, the church, love God and our neighbors and ourselves so much that we will stay away from our buildings until it is safe. We are the church.”

And so, Church, there we are. We are called and equipped and commissioned, we are named and loved and sent. We are sent, and we go: into our days, into our week, into the eyes-and-ears-open world of social analysis and focused action, with our travelling companion, the Holy Spirit, doing much of the actual work. For all this and more, we encourage one another, we engage the issues of the day, and we give thanks to the one who names us, loves us, and sends us. Amen.

References cited:

Johnson, Deon K, cited at <https://www.mystjoes.me/blog/from-fr-mike-s-desk/the-church-is-never-closed>

Roberts, Mark D. <https://depree.org/why-did-jesus-send-out-his-disciples-two-by-two/>

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