

Shake the Dust off Your Feet

June 15, 2008 | Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (Fifth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 6) Year A

Lectionary citations

Gen 18: 1-15, (21:1-7)

Ps 116:1-2, 12-19

Rom 5:1-8

Matt 9:35-10:8, (9-23)

"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

As I write this, a mission team from Dubuque, Iowa is bedding down on the floors of our church on air mattresses. They are returning from a week of hard work rehabbing hurricane-damaged homes in Biloxi Mississippi. According to wagon master, Frank Zahn, the trip was very successful and productive, with only one minor incident of a young man having to take a quick trip to the emergency room after being hit on the head with a hammer. We just finished a clothing drive to support the Jamaican Christian Medical Mission. I will be going back to the health clinic next week to finish up the immunizations I need for the trip. A couple of months ago, our deacons worked hard to plan and serve the ham supper, raising \$1,000, much of which will go to support local missions to the poor. Why do we work so hard for Mission? What is it about Mission that makes it part of the core of what it means to be Christians?

Today's Gospel is one of those founding moments, where Jesus begins to sketch out the purpose of the Church, a purpose that would become clear to the disciples only after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. The purpose of the church is traditionally divided into two areas: Ministry and Mission. Ministry is how we live out Jesus' command in John 15, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."

Mission is how we live out the great commission of Matthew 28, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Today’s Gospel is Jesus teaching his disciples how to do Mission. The reading starts out by giving Jesus’ motivation for sending the disciples out on the mission road: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus is deeply moved by the plight of the common people, exploited by the Romans and their local enforcers, and abandoned by the self-righteous Pharisees. Jesus decided something needed to be done, and he decided to send the disciples out to do it.

For me, this brings up one of the central mysteries of the Christian faith, a mystery that I think we continue to struggle with. God calls us to work for the Kingdom of God. Yet, the Bible also tells us that the Kingdom of God will come to completion regardless of what we human beings do. The work that God calls us to do cannot be competed—it is beyond human power to bring about the Kingdom of God in this fallen world. Moreover, our work is not necessary to bring about the Kingdom. As Jesus says at the end of today’s reading, “Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”

God does not need us to fulfill his purpose. Instead, we need God to fulfill our purpose. Ministry and Mission always go together. Jesus showed his love for disciples—his Ministry—by sending them out in Mission. We Minister to each other, teaching, healing, encouraging, forgiving, and accepting in order to strengthen one another for Mission. It is in Mission, spreading the Good News about Jesus Christ, that we both

experience God's mercy, and we are given the chance to tell others how God has been so good to us.

We lose track of this when we start looking at Mission as a social service program. If we see Mission as a program that provides for the needs of a target population, either material or spiritual needs, we can be deflected into focusing on getting the most "bang for the buck," which usually implies using paid professionals, not volunteers, and running the mission as a business, not as spiritual exercise. Judging missions on their effectiveness in meeting the needs of a target population leads to reflections like those of Harvard University Psychology professor Steven Pinker, who compared Bill Gates with Mother Theresa. "Gates, in deciding what to do with his fortune, crunched the numbers and determined that he could alleviate the most misery by fighting everyday scourges in the developing world like malaria, diarrhea, and parasites. Mother Teresa, for her part, extolled the virtue of suffering and ran her well-financed missions accordingly: their sick patrons were offered plenty of prayer but harsh conditions, few analgesics and dangerously primitive medical care. It's not hard to see why the moral reputations of this pair should be so out of line with the good they have done. Mother Teresa was the very embodiment of saintliness: white-clad, sad-eyed, ascetic, and often photographed with the wretched of the earth. Gates is a nerd's nerd and the world's richest man, as likely to enter heaven as the proverbial camel squeezing through the needle's eye. I doubt these examples will persuade anyone to favor Bill Gates over Mother Teresa for sainthood. But they show that our heads can be turned by an aura of sanctity, distracting us from a more objective reckoning of the actions that make people suffer or flourish."

Such comparisons ignore the spiritual core of Mission. I am not arguing that Missions should be ineffective in meeting the needs of those Jesus called “sheep without a shepherd.” To play with Jesus’ metaphor, you do not want to send workers into the field to harvest who merely trample down the grain. However, the effectiveness of missions is not just measured by the number of houses built, the number of sacks of rice delivered, or the number of teeth pulled. Missions are effective if they do what Christ called us to do, to spread the Good News among his lost sheep.

It is clear that even Professor Pinker would not argue that Bill Gates and his collaborators have been spiritually challenged and transformed by his philanthropy in the same way that Mother Theresa and her sisters have been sanctified by their lives of service, sacrifice, and suffering. There is a good reason to send folks out on hard working Missions rather than “mission vacations” that emphasize fellowship, cultural exchange, and sight-seeing. Real mission involves hardship, discomfort, and even a little suffering. The kind of sufferings we experience on Mission are not usual sufferings of life in the world—getting passed over for promotion, the car breaking down on the way to work, another trip to the dentist. Those are sufferings that result from **our** needs and wants not being met. On Mission we suffer inconvenience, discomfort, even danger of death because we are putting the needs of **others** first. There is a good reason that Missions usually include sleeping on hard church floors far from the comforts of home, getting up early in the morning, and working hard painting a wall, hammering nails into a house frame under the hot sun, or hauling away another load of wreckage. This reason is given by St. Paul in today’s Epistle: “we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and

hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

You might notice Jesus' charge to the disciples to “travel light,” not taking what we would consider necessities—money, a bag, a change of clothes, a spare set of sandals—much less any luxuries. The disciples were to live with the local people, eating the same food, sleeping in their houses. By traveling light, the disciples were forced to develop ground-level relationships with the people they came to serve. They did not come into town with a bunch of semi-trailers of equipment, pitch their tents, put on a rocking revival, and roll out of town the next morning. They had to get to know the people of the town up close and learn who really was worthy to receive the Good News. It is through these personal relationships that the disciples spread the Gospel and freely gave to others what Jesus had so freely given to them—healing and hope. The Jamaican Christian Medical Mission keeps going back to Carron Hall because it is important to build a lasting relationship between our two communities. It is through these relationships, filled with the Holy Spirit, that God pours his love into the hearts of both the Mission workers and the friends they serve. It is in these relationships that we begin to see that the Kingdom of God is at hand, and begin to share in the glory of God.

The focus of Mission on building relationships also explains why Jesus directed his disciples to leave those towns where they could not find even one person willing to welcome them or listen to the Gospel. Jews traditionally shook the dust of their feet when they left Gentile territory, so they would not take Gentile dust back to the sacred Jewish land. Jesus makes it clear that where the disciples cannot establish a relationship with at least one person in the local community, there is no point in the healing the sick, raising

the dead, cleansing those who have leprosy, and driving out demons. They need to shake the dust off their feet and move on to a town where they can establish a relationship with someone who welcomes the Gospel. People sometimes ask why we go to Jamaica on our medical mission when there are unmet medical needs here in Cape Girardeau. The most important reason we keep going back to Jamaica is that we are welcome there. Because we come from a distant, rich, and powerful country to give freely back what we have freely received, the relationships we establish have openness to the Holy Spirit that allows the grace of God to transform the hearts of the mission team and the Jamaicans they serve.

Not everyone can or should go to Jamaica. You may be called to a Ministry that strengthens and equips others to go out in Mission. However, I believe that all Christians are called to Mission—to spread the Good News to the lost sheep. Regardless of your health, age, gifts, and abilities you can establish relationships with friends, co-workers, neighbors, relatives, and the folks you see at the store or diner every week, Mission relationships that spread the Good News about Jesus Christ. Sure, when we bring Christ into these relationships we risk ridicule and rejection. Mission is rewarding, but it does involve suffering, which still hurts, even if it is good for us. However, remember, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Since God gave us so much, it is time to give what we can back in return. “Freely you have received, freely give.” Amen.

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