

June 18th, 2023

Matthew 9:35 – 10:8 “Plan Ahead, Be Flexible”

Some of you might be thinking, “Jesse, in eight days you’re going to be taking a 12-week Sabbatical. That’s a long time to be away. Are you sure you want to leave us with a scripture where Jesus tells his disciples, ‘You received without payment; give without payment?’ Because ‘senior minister’ might not be a paid position by the time you come back!” It’s fine. I trust you. Besides, this text doesn’t have anything to do with professional clergy. I’ve said this before, but many of our movement’s founders didn’t believe in paid clergy. Their goal was the restoration of the New Testament church, and many of them said, “There’s nothing in the New Testament that says clergy were paid.” And this text from Matthew was one of the examples they cited. In the early days of our movement churches would have what they called, “gentlemen preachers” whose primary vocation wasn’t clergy. The first Disciples church Mary served was in Snowville, Virginia. Their founding pastor, Chester Bullard, was a medical doctor. That was his bread and butter. His preaching was an unpaid side-hustle although most people said they’d rather him stick to preaching. It’s like that joke – “What do you call someone who graduated at the bottom of their class from medical school? Doctor.” Apparently, that applied to Dr. Bullard. Anyway, after about a decade of trying that model on for size, the early Disciples churches realized that things work out better when you have

professional credentialed clergy. Although I suppose the same joke applies to what you call a pastor who graduates at the bottom of their class.

But again, what we have here in this passage that Tom read has nothing to do with whether there should or shouldn't be professional clergy. This has to do with an assignment that Jesus gave his disciples shortly after he called Matthew to be the last of the 12 apostles. Okay, but didn't we already cover this a couple weeks ago with the great commission? "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations?" No, that was the commission Jesus gave to his disciples after his death and resurrection and before he ascended to heaven. He basically said, "Now that I'm no longer going to be with you in person, your mission is to bring the good news to the whole world regardless of whether they are Jew, Greek, Gentile, male female, rich, poor, red, yellow, black, or white. This is your *mission* to the world ... to *all* people. Furthermore, the disciples you make along the way will go on to make other disciples so that the cycle continues exponentially long after you are gone." That's what the Great Commission is all about. Today's scripture took place nine chapters before the Great Commission when Jesus was just getting started in his earthly ministry.

What we have in front of us this morning is an assignment – sort of like a "side-quest" if you're a gamer. Jesus told the twelve to go out among the "lost sheep of the house of Israel," not the whole world like in the Great Commission.

In fact, Jesus told them to stay far away from the Gentiles and Samaritans. And this wasn't because Jesus didn't like the Gentiles or Samaritans either. There are plenty of other parables and examples of Jesus calling Gentiles and Samaritans, especially in Matthew's gospel. But Jesus wanted his disciples to concentrate on Jewish folks first – and not just any Jews, but ones who were lost ... the ones who were like sheep without a shepherd. One of my favorite commentators said that the priority Jesus put on the Jewish community wasn't a, "You're my favorites, so you get to go first" thing. It was more like a, "You all should know this already, so here's a reminder." Kind of like how Jesus got snarky with the Pharisees last week for not understanding the message of the prophets which they should have.

Thankfully Jesus didn't send his disciples out unprepared. He made sure they were well-equipped to face the challenges ahead of them. In verse 1 of chapter 10, Matthew writes, "He gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness." This is what Jesus was already doing and would continue to do. Like I said last week, he wasn't advertising. He didn't engage in any kind of self-promotion. He was living out his call through his actions. He wanted the disciples to do the same, which is why he told them not to expect or even accept any sort of compensation for their work. He basically said, "Plan ahead, be flexible" which is every pastor's motto.

So, let's take a look at what Jesus called them to do and see if any of it applies to things we can do as Disciples of Christ in our time and place. In verse 8 he tells his disciples to "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons." Okay, since we started out talking about professional clergy today, let's talk about how many times I run into these situations on any given day as a pastor. Do I run into my fair share of sickness? Unfortunately, yes, I do. I can't say it happens every day, but there's not a week that goes by where I'm not in communication with people who are facing illness. That's true for any pastor. But how many of those people do I cure? The answer to that question is, "a big, fat zero." Unlike Dr. Chester Bullard, I'm a univocational pastor and I have no business practicing medicine. Okay, how about "raise the dead?" I, like many other clergy, encounter folks who have died. Not as often as Mary, does though. That's her specialty, so she deals with it every day. For me, I'd say it's about once every month or two and that's including the occasional calls I get from Brusie or Newton Bracewell to see if I'm available to do a memorial service. The important question is, "How many of these deceased people have I raised to life?" Once again, zero. I'm pretty sure Mary hasn't either, but she's operating under HIPAA rules, so I'm not 100% sure, but my guess is that she hasn't raised the dead. "Cleansing the lepers?" I have never encountered anyone who has been officially diagnosed with modern-day leprosy, although most scholars agree that "leprosy" in Biblical times referred to *any* disfiguring skin condition. Again, without a medical license I have no

business trying to cure leprosy. How about casting out demons? For the most part, Bible scholars agree that this probably refers mostly to neurological or behavioral issues caused by a variety of physiological and psychological influences. Yet again, I lack the credentials to address these issues. Now, churches generally have folks in their congregations who do have the credentials to address *some* of these things on the list. I've asked appropriately credentialed nurses if they'd serve as camp nurses before, but I'm sure I'd get in all sorts of trouble if I asked fishermen and tax to do this collectors like Jesus did.

What are we to do then? We call ourselves “big D” Disciples because we believe that our mission is to be actively engaged in ministry because that's what Jesus called his “little d” disciples to do. But how can we do this when the mission is to do things that seem far beyond our capabilities or credentials? Also, how do we make the distinction between “Great Commission” work to all the world like we talked about a few weeks ago and these “side quests” that Jesus assigns to his disciples like we see in this morning's scripture?

Here's another thing to consider – If this side-quest in today's scripture is to the “lost sheep of Israel,” who is that in our context? If Jesus was referring to the Jewish community who were lost like sheep without a shepherd, who is that today? I think Reb Lisa is doing a fantastic job over at Congregation Beth Israel, and I'm sure she deals with quite a

few “lost sheep” issues on her own so I’m going to stay on my side of the street and let Lisa handle that. Okay, so does this mean folks who are Christians but are lost? Well, it could. I frequently encounter people who at one time identified as Christian but have, for a variety of reasons, become lost. And this is a ministry that a lot of churches either forget or have put on the back burner because they believe that making *new* disciples is the highest priority. And I get that. That’s “great commission” work and it is needed. But sometimes churches think, “Well, we did our job. You’re on your own now buddy!” So yes, there is definitely a need to provide care and nurture for those who are feeling lost or disenfranchised. And I think as a nation, we’re all a little disenfranchised right now. So let’s cast our nets wide and apply this side-quest that Jesus is giving us a little more broadly. Let’s talk about what *our* role is in addressing these four tasks.

“Cure the sick” -- This may mean caring for folks whose physical ailments are overwhelming. We may not all have medical credentials, but there are plenty of examples of those who are affected by lack of adequate medical care whether it’s the uninsured or the under-insured. Then there are people who are burdened with the effects of illness, or who are caretakers for those who are burdened and those who have become financially insolvent because of the overwhelming cost of health care. Our part may include our continued support of Shalom Free Clinic or providing support groups like our Healing Circle.

“Raise the dead” – Last week we read about how Jesus raised the daughter of a synagogue leader who he said, “Wasn’t dead, but was sleeping.” We all know folks who *seem* dead, but need to be awakened, or raised. I’m talking about people who have lost hope, people who have been hurt by toxic religion, people who have given up. We can address this through worship and Bible study and other ministries that lift people’s spirits and awaken them to new ways of connecting to God.

“Cleanse the lepers” – Lepers in Biblical times were folks who were cast out and labeled “unclean” for whatever reason. In the same way that “lepers” was a blanket term to describe people with any kind of skin disease in Biblical times, we see folks in our time and place who have been labeled “unclean” for any number of reasons. This month especially, I’m thinking of gender and sexual minorities. Our task here may be providing safe, healing space for the ones who have been cast out and labeled “unclean.”

“Cast out demons” – This is a tough one just because it’s hard to define in our cultural context. Are we talking about people who are dealing with mental illness? Are we talking about people who are struggling with addiction? Are we talking about people who act out because of past trauma and abuse? I’d say, “yes, all of the above.” I believe our task is to create ‘trauma free zones’ where people can seek sanctuary. How? By offering space and resources to support

groups and recovery groups. By working in partnerships with places like Iverson Center, and other organizations who advocate for healing and good mental health. By providing food, shelter, clothing and all those other baseline Maslowe's hierarchy of needs. By providing grief support for folks facing the trauma of loss. All of these things can and do fulfill this part of the task.

And these are just a few ideas. Keep those ideas coming. Be aware of the needs of those who are like sheep without a shepherd. Use the creativity that God has blessed us all with to discover new ways of carrying this out. Like the disciples in our scripture, Jesus has given us the authority to address these needs and reminds us that, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few."