

# Sent With A Mission

## Matthew 9:35-10:23

Our extended passage of scripture just read is part of the "Missionary Discourse," the fourth of Jesus' five great discourses in Matthew. Opening with a time when Jesus communicated that there was overwhelming need among the masses and crowds, and Jesus commissioned the twelve disciples as "laborers into his harvest" (9:38). This commissioning was relevant not only to the twelve apostles, but to the life of every Christian believer and seeker. **Stephen Butler Murray**

Did you notice how Jesus made the work look easy? He went to all the cities, preached in all the synagogues, and cured every single ailment. No distance was too great, no audience too skeptical, no disease too severe. Jesus got it done. But when he commissioned his disciples to carry out his ministry, things get much more difficult. For anyone setting off on a new task—we can think especially of graduates leaving school or church members being commissioned for special service—these verses offer a sobering assessment of what lies ahead for those who follow in Jesus' footsteps.

The divine mission Christ gives is to be applied to this world, with its political reality, its social divisions, and its systemic disorder. Despite the challenges, despite the questionable likelihood of success, despite our inevitable difficulty in accomplishing what he could do far more easily than we, Christ confidently sends us out. This text forces us to acknowledge the gap between the ideal and the real, and then to take a major leap of faith in our own discipleship.

As we listen to these words we wonder if anyone apart from Jesus is up to the job. Cure the sick? Cleanse the lepers? Maybe with the help of modern medicine. Cast out demons? Raise the dead? Few of us feel up to those assignments. When we contrast Jesus' accomplishments with the disciples' impending task, the followers of Jesus seem destined to fall short of his performance. While Jesus went to all the cities and villages, the disciples were to remain strictly among their own kind. Jesus preached in every synagogue, but the disciples would find some houses welcoming, others unfriendly. Jesus met throngs of people and cured all of their diseases; the disciples in turn would encounter hardship after hardship and suffer much themselves.

Those early followers, as firsthand witnesses of what was possible with Christ, could very well have gone off with confidence, determination, and nerves of steel. We, however, may feel more like sheep without a shepherd. Most of us lack the confidence to talk about their faith even with those sitting next to them in church, let alone strangers in neighboring towns. The disciples may have been willing to shake the dust off their feet and try the gospel somewhere else, but in our multicultural world we grow hesitant to approach anyone, for fear of seeming too pushy with our faith. Perhaps the original followers of Jesus had success curing diseases and performing miracles, but many of us consider our prospects of such achievements very slim indeed.

Nevertheless, just as the disciples were sent out to those towns in ancient Israel, the followers of Jesus continue to be challenged to take little more than faith out into this world and get Christ's work done. It is a world that requires much faith, and many of us may wonder if we have enough to accomplish what is required. As Jesus made the distinction between Gentiles and those in the house of Israel, we are reminded of the ongoing political divisions and cultural rifts in our world, in our nation, even within the church. As we hear of how the good news was spread

effectively all those years ago, we struggle to think how we can broadcast that message in a world so overwhelmed by information, distraction, and competing ideas of truth. When the disciples were sent out and were told to take nothing with them and to receive no payment, such resolve makes our relationship with wealth seem all the more disconnected from the needs of those continuing to live in poverty. We cannot but wonder what, if any, hardships we would personally be willing to undergo for our beliefs. If we view the twelve disciples as inferior substitutes for Jesus, the gap between the real and the ideal seems tremendously wide for those of us hearing this commission today.

However, we must acknowledge that throughout history, amazing things—seemingly impossible things—have been done and continue to be done through ordinary members of the church. This morning during our time of joys and concerns Marsha told of her 17 year-old nephew who died and was revived, and will be graduating from high school next week and going on to college in the fall. We rejoice for these reminders that miracles still happen in our lifetime. Jesus' words have encouraged and motivated far more than the twelve disciples listed in these verses. Due in part to the efforts made by faithful Christians, diseases thought to be incurable have been eradicated, medical miracles take place, unjust laws have been overturned, and individuals who thought some doors would never open have seen them swing wide. Perhaps most humbling of all is the fact that in many parts of the world where Christians are persecuted today, Christianity not only survives but thrives.

When such accomplishments occur, they leave the faithful ascribing success to a higher power, and rightly so. It is Christ who enables us to do what we could not do on our own. This week I had the experience of having privilege of being at my friend Edith Armour deathbed. I was not able to cure her illness. I was not able to stop her from dying. But my task, my mission was to give comfort to the family

by my presence and prayers in Jesus' name. This passage leaves as a mystery why Christ even includes us in his mission and how exactly we meet success through him, but the faithful do achieve miraculous things, even if it is sitting with a dying friend. Perhaps it is because Jesus continues to have compassion on shepherd less sheep. Perhaps it is because prayers have been answered and enough laborers have been sent out into the bountiful harvest. Perhaps the words of the Father's Spirit have been spoken through the right people at the right time.

Perhaps as the followers of Christ, we have found the faith to see that the gap between the real and the ideal can in fact be bridged. Jesus, at least, seems to think we can get the job done, even if it will not be easy. **Alexander Wimberly**

We, like those in Jesus' day, continue to be sent with a mission to make the world a better place in Jesus' name.

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