

Pentecost 5  
June 15, 2008  
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Lord you gave the great commission;  
Heal the sick and preach the word.  
Lest the church neglect its mission and the gospel go unheard,  
help us witness to your purpose with renewed integrity.  
With the Spirit's gifts empower us for the work of ministry. *Hymnal 780*

The opening verses of the Gospel this morning describe Jesus as a teacher, preacher and healer. This ministry grew out of Jesus' deep love and compassion for the world. Wherever he saw suffering or need he responded. When ever the opportunity presented itself, he proclaimed the kingdom of God.

Thus Matthew tell us Jesus turned his attention to the crowds who followed him for they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus said to his followers, "The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few..." Jesus prayed for necessary workers to attend to the harvest. Then Jesus summons his disciples and sent them out as apostles. This is the only time the word "apostle" is used in the Gospels denoting "one who is sent out."

This account of sending out the apostles is in the Gospels of Mark and Luke as well. Luke records a similar venture when Jesus sent out seventy apostles. To have included an evangelistic venture so prominently in Scripture indicates that the early Church thought this was very important. Now being Episcopalians, I am confident that evangelism is not your favorite topic. In fact, we seem to pride ourselves in not being like those evangelical churches who beat people over the head with religion.

When I was young and did not know any better I fashioned an effort to promote the church among the people in a new neighborhood that sprang up near the church building. One afternoon I went to visit one of our older members. She quizzed me about what we were doing and what my motive was for sending people out to promote the church. She said to me, "Son, don't you know anyone who wants to be an Episcopalian is?"

Even if evangelism is not our favorite topic and even if we feel as if we really are not good evangelists, it seems to be one of God's favorite topics. Since we are in

God's church it seems to me to be good manners to pay attention to topics the Spirit casts before us.

We can get some sense of what evangelism is about by looking more closely at this account from Matthew's Gospel. The first thing we notice is that the population is ripe for such a venture. The human heart was created for the gospel and the gospel for the heart. It takes surprisingly little salesmanship to engage in evangelism. People are hungry for meaning in their lives. People look in all sorts of places for loving relationships and a source of hope. As God's people, who are part of a church that ministers in Christ's name, we have what others are looking for - our faith provides meaning for our lives.

Notice next that Jesus commends teamwork. Mark tells us explicitly that Jesus sent them out two by two. Evangelism is not a solo ministry or just the work of the clergy. Evangelism is the work of the entire body, the church empowered to engage others in meaningful ministry.

Finally the work of evangelism is done by displays of spiritual power not by passionate sermons or fancy speeches. Evangelists do not have to be persuasive. The power of God is the persuasive element. Spiritual power is a gift of God not something we have to "whomp up" on our own. Note that Jesus calmly warns that not everyone is going to choose to follow. His concern is that every one be given the opportunity.

In each of the three gospel accounts the disciples return to Jesus breathless falling all over each other to report what happened.

Is that how you picture evangelism? I think most of us imagine just the opposite. We think that we have to be eloquent speakers or persuasive debaters to talk about our church and our faith. We believe in the old adage in polite conversation one avoids politics and religion.

It is high time we rethink evangelism. The reason has nothing to do with church growth or the fact that mainline denominations are losing members. It has to do with the fact that the crop is heavier than ever and the people among whom we live are like sheep without a shepherd. The current contemporary movement is like a casserole of stale religious leftovers pulling from various faith traditions. The human heart is hungry for good news - any good news.

How many of the people you work with understand what Paul is writing about in the lesson this morning from Romans? How many understand what it means that Christ died for us while we were still sinners to prove God's love for all of us? How many of our neighbors, in anguish over failed marriages or difficulties with children, know that God's love is undeterred by the struggles of our lives? How many friends confronted with serious illness know the transforming power of Christ's suffering that accompanies our own. Can you afford to remain silent when all around us are needs crying to be touched by the love of God?

Jesus' call to evangelism frightens us less when we realize it is a call to teamwork. How many of you are here today because two nicely dressed people came knocking on your door and asked you to come to church? Anybody? How many are here this morning because a friend talked about how wonderful it was to be part of this parish and invited you to come check it out? Some few of us I know.

In this day and age teamwork is not scaring people or coercing people to come to church. Teamwork is meeting people who are visiting with us for the first time introducing them to other parishioners around you. Teamwork is noticing a person is not familiar with our service and asking those around that person to offer appropriate assistance. Teamwork is knowing a parishioner has needs and asking fellow parishioners to help meet that need. Teamwork is going to the bedside of a sick friend and asking others to pray for you. The outcome can be wonderful, powerful, beyond expectation.

I interview candidates for the chaplaincy program at Wellspan Hospital as a member of the professional consultation team for pastoral care. We have had a number of persons interview from other cultures. I recall one person who was hoping to complete his work here in this country so he could go home and teach. He was talking about the power of healing which seemed appropriate in a hospital setting. He said someone called him and asked for healing. He admitted did not know how to heal this person, that is what doctors are supposed to do. So, he told a missionary friend about the request. The friend said, "Go anoint the person with oil and pray for them." "I can't heal this person and I don't want to give false hope," he replied. "Of course you can't," his friend said, "but you can be the ass Christ rides into the room on."

Effectiveness in any ministry depends not on what we do but on what God can do working through us. We can be the wick that connects the flame to the candle.

It is God who does the work. The more willing you are to offer yourself to God to be a channel of grace, the more often you will find yourself in the position of the apostles. You will discover the highest expression of God's love and favor; the privilege of being the means God chooses to convey love to others.

Lord you call us to your service  
In my name baptize and teach  
That the world may trust your promise, life abundant meant for each.  
Give us all new fervor, draw us closer in community.  
With the Spirit's gifts empower us for the work of ministry.

Amen