

AUTHORIZED AGENTS

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

2 Corinthians 12:7b-10
Mark 6:7-13

July 15, 2018

In a world that can be hard, wearisome, and even scary sometimes, it is tempting to think of this place, the church, as a sort of hideout. As we share our favorite stories, celebrate our blessings, and find encouragement through our fellowship, it's easy to start thinking of ourselves as consumers of all that God has to offer us – things like mercy, forgiveness and healing – things like the peace of Christ abiding presence, the joy of abundant life, the hope of eternal life, and the transforming, saving power of God's love. To gather here weekly, joining our hearts and voices in worship, is an act of acknowledging and giving thanks for God's amazing love and gracious blessings. And yet, right in the midst of the good feelings and blessings that are a result of worshiping God, the Holy Spirit comes knocking at our door, disturbing our warm and cozy gathering and reminding us that it is time to step beyond our enjoying and celebrating of God's love and grace and into the role of sharing it. The thing is, we are not meant to be merely receivers, consumers of God's love; we are meant to be bearers of God's grace, providers of God's love. In fact, according to our Gospel lesson today, Jesus clearly authorizes his disciples and sends them out with the power of the Holy Spirit to speak and act in His name.

Initially, the disciples signed on to follow Jesus after his personal invitation to each of them. For those disciples, it became immediately clear that being with Jesus was exciting, in fact, it was "goose-bump" inspiring to be around him, to learn from him, to witness the miraculous things he was able to do. It was great hanging around with Jesus, but suddenly Jesus wants them to do something different, something more; he wants them to go out, on their own, and to be his disciples to the world. That's not what they signed up for. They signed up to be in the presence of a great teacher, not to become those teachers themselves. Let's try to imagine what those disciples might have thought about this new expectation from Jesus. There you are, perfectly content to be a follower, when Jesus suddenly decides, "I need some help, and I'm nominating you." Then he holds his hands out over your heads and says a prayer that travels down your backbone like a chill, giving you authority over demons, over disease – even over death – and when he has finished you open your eyes and look at each other to see if you can tell any difference. Next you take a deep breath and you wonder whether anything has really changed inside. Do you feel wiser, stronger, and more capable? Well, you're not so sure about that! But you do feel sort of blessed.

Then Jesus starts calling out names. "Kevin and Mary, you take the east side of Chagrin falls, Kris and Gary you cover the south side, Sarah and Shirley you take the west, Mark and Kris, you focus on the north. Kim and Chris, you head to South Russell. Chris and Danielle you cover Solon; Andy and Carrie you cover Aurora. Bainbridge is a big area, so Jim and Grace, Jon and Leslie split up, spread out and take care of that area. First of all, leave your wallets and purses here. You'll be traveling on foot – and you won't need a backpack, however, you can take a walking stick if you want. God will provide, and that fact will be easier for others to see if you don't carry all your own provisions with you. Here's what I need you to do: preach the kingdom, heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the outcasts, cast out demons. I

need the help, so I'm sending you. I can't wait to hear the stories you bring back. Now go; get started!"

It might not happen exactly like that at church, but it happens all the same. At the end of every worship service, while the last word of the last hymn is still ringing in the air, I always give you some marching orders – I tell you to go forth in the name and by the power of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." These words that conclude our service are not words for those who have come only because of what they can receive from worship – they are not words for those who are interested only in being consumers of God's presence, and personal beneficiaries of God's love and mercy. Such words at the end of worship emphasize that action is the necessary response of being in God's presence, and receiving God's gracious love. The Charge and Blessing are like marching orders for those who are meant to go out and to be bearers of God's Word, providers of God's love, and benefactors for the ongoing work of Christ in the world.

It's easy to gloss over or take for granted the disciples job description in this passage. But what they were told to do, what they were empowered to do were the same things that Jesus himself had been doing. None of them had been born under a bright, guiding star or had angels sing hosannas over their cribs, or received exotic gifts from foreign dignitaries. None of them were the Son of God and Jesus could have chosen to remind them of their inadequacies and insisted that they just remain his assistants for their own comfort and safety, and to possibly avoid malpractice accusations. Jesus could have let them mix the mud when he healed blind people, or spray the Lysol when he cleansed lepers, or unwrap the bandages from those he had raised from the dead. He could have trained them to simply be assistants, but that's not what he did. Instead, he taught, and trained and began to transfer his ministry to them even while he was still alive. He entrusted it to them. With some advice and only a little bit of training, he sent them out to heal wounds, restore sight and bring the dead back to life. He sent them out to reveal and preach the nearness of the kingdom of God. Jesus sent them out as authorized agents of his message, as embodiments of his presence and power.

It was important for the disciples to do what they said, and to talk about what they did. Preaching the kingdom without doing anything about it is just politics, and we know only too well how divisive and ineffective politics can be. Preaching the kingdom without good works, without the good news of real help and transformation is nothing more than a band aide, a temporary reprieve. However, to proclaim the Kingdom of God while acting it out – that is powerful; that is transformational. That is what Jesus did, and that is what Jesus sent his friends out to do.

I have to admit, though, that there is something that bugs me. It's the way Jesus sent them out – no money, and no change of clothes. Why send them out with so much power and so few accessories? Personally, I wonder if they might have gotten more attention and had more of an impact if they had arrived in style – like in a long sleek bus with something catchy painted on the side – perhaps a white horse and chariot would have been good! Such an arrival would have carried some real authority, and reflected the kind of prestige that was appropriate to their important task. But apparently, that is not what Jesus wants. The way Jesus set it up, the way it had to be in order for it to clearly be from God, was that the providing for others had to come out of the disciples own need so that it was God's abundance that others saw most clearly. The Apostle Paul also came to understand this same truth after he heard the Lord say to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

So after the disciples were given authority by Jesus, they started going from house to house saying, "Excuse me, but may we stay with you? We can't pay you anything, and we don't have anything to barter, but perhaps you could see your way clear to giving us a bowl of soup and a slice of bread?" There is tremendous paradox here. Are they beggars or miracle working disciples? And if they are miracle workers, then why must they depend on the kindness of strangers for a cup of water or a corner in which to sleep?

There is a Buddhist custom that might help us understand better our story. In Buddhism, all serious seekers of the truth must spend at least a year of their lives as beggars. During that year, they go from village to village wearing nothing but a simple robe and owning nothing but a begging bowl, asking perfect strangers to supply their most basic needs. After that year is over, they are free to return to their former way of life, but as you can imagine they are not likely to return as the same person they once were.

For all of us who live in this country, and in particular those of us gathered here today, I think it's really hard for us to imagine what it is like to own nothing, to have nothing but our own need, and to understand that the only thing we have to offer anyone else is what we ourselves have been graciously given by Another. What must it be like not only to talk dependence on God but to live it every day for a year, for a lifetime, understanding that reliance on God equals reliance on the goodness and grace of others? That kind of experience would certainly change a person for good.

After a year like that, you could hardly take your turn at a soup kitchen and hold yourself apart from the person on the other side of the counter. When you look at him or her you would see yourself, or you would see God, but either way whatever you offered him would be offered not out of your abundance but out of your own need. It would be offered out of a need to give him or her a portion of what has been given to you, and then to also receive whatever he or she has to give you in return without thinking that such behavior somehow makes you hero.

It is simply what you do, when you know who you are and who you are working for, when you are sent out to proclaim the kingdom and to act it out with nothing else than what God has given you. When it comes down to being a vessel of God's Spirit and a provider of God's love, there is really only one who is qualified, and that One sends us out with nothing at all and yet He provides us with everything we need. Disciples are sent out as those who have experienced the blessing of forgiveness, the peace of Christ abiding presence, the joy of abundant life, the hope of eternal life, and the transforming, saving power of God's love. These are the humbling and transforming experiences which when coupled with the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit make us authorized, effective agents of Christ in the world. These things are nothing less than the most important things we have to share with the world, and they happen to be exactly what the world needs most. Amen.