

St. James Lutheran Church

June 15, 2008

Pentecost V

First Reading: Exodus 19:2-8a

Second Reading: Romans 5:1-8

Gospel: Matthew 9:35-10:8

Sent to Serve

By Richard Holmer

Last week we were reminded of the great mercy of our God. When Jesus called a despised sinner like Matthew to be one of his disciples, he demonstrated that the love of God truly does extend to every last, unworthy one of us. We hear echoes of that same mercy in today's Second Reading from Romans, where Paul writes:

“at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly . . . While we were still sinners Christ died for us.”

The Savior who reached out to the likes of Matthew has mercy on us all – he invites each of us to know and enjoy his grace and peace.

As the gospel narrative continues today, we see that those whom Jesus invites, he also sends out to serve. The original 12 disciples are listed by name – and here for the first time they are referred to as “apostles”: those who are sent. We see Matthew, the tax collector's name on the list along with Peter and Andrew, James and John and the rest. This “sending out” of the twelve in chapter 10 of the gospel anticipates the so-called “Great Commission” which comes at the close of the gospel in Chapter 28. We might think of this as a little commission – kind of like a short term internship. Jesus sends them not to the whole world, but only to the house of Israel. It is to be their trial run in ministry.

The twelve are sent to do what Jesus does – to have a share in Christ’s ministry. Jesus gives them authority to

- proclaim the good news
- cure the sick
- cleanse lepers
- cast out demons
- even to raise the dead!

Jesus places major responsibility on their shoulders. That’s what is challenging about their task – it is also what is glorious: to do the work of the Kingdom of God.

The appropriate response to receiving mercy is to act mercifully toward others. This sounds basic – even obvious – but it is all too easily overlooked. The training Jesus imparts is consistent:

- Love others as I have loved you.
- Forgive as you have been forgiven.
- Serve others as I have served you.
- Freely have you received; now freely give.

The gospel is like great music. It comes alive when we actually play it, when we live it. It’s not enough just to have the sheet music. You and I need to live out the melody. This whole rhythm of sharing goes to the very heart of what the church is, what it is for. The church is where we receive mercy. We come to be forgiven, renewed and blessed – AND WE ARE. We go from this place in full assurance that our sins are forgiven, that God’s promise is renewed. Through the church, God meets us in our deepest needs: God provides what only God can. God supplies our need for saving grace.

And then, as with the 12 disciples, God includes us in the ministry of Jesus Christ. We are sent out to serve. As people of God, we are always blessed so that we might be a blessing. The consequence of forgiveness is that we are set free – not free to do our own thing, but free to do God’s thing in this world.

THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST IS
NOT TO MEET THE NEEDS OF ITS MEMBERS.

The church does in fact address our deepest needs, but the mission doesn't end there, it begins there. As Jesus described his own ministry, so it is with the church: the church exists not to be served, but to serve. And so we are always headed down the wrong path whenever we start talking in terms of whether the church is meeting my needs or your needs. So often when we talk about our "needs" we are actually expressing our "wants."

I continue to be impressed with what former presiding Bishop H. George Anderson several years ago:

"What people want is comfort, security, and to be left alone.

What people need is service, sacrifice, and to be brought together."

These are strong words – and, I believe, true words.

As a church, as a congregation, as individual Christians, we need to come to grips with this distinction between what we want and what we truly need. I encourage you to think about and talk about what we need to be as a church with your family and fellow members. Sure, comfort, security and being left alone sound pretty good some days – but what does that have to do with following Christ? A life lived solely for our own benefit grows hollow and meaningless. At some point we realize that we have a deep need to lead lives that are useful and beneficial to others.

William Willimon is a Methodist Bishop in Alabama. Willimon says, "To be a Christian is to be someone willing to assist Jesus." And then he shares this story to illustrate his point:

On my worst day as a bishop, a grueling eight-hour marathon of nine appointments with complaining clergy begging me to move them, when I finally dragged myself before my assistant in order to go home, my heart sank when she said, "You've got one more appointment."

In despair I invited two older women into my office.

"We've come to Birmingham from Cullman to tell you about our ministry," one said. "Gladys's grandson was busted, DUI. We went over to the youth prison camp to visit him. Sad to say, we had never been there before. We appalled by the conditions – those young men were packed in there like animals. We got to know them. Are you aware that only ten percent of them can read? An illiterate 19-year-old, and we wonder why he's in prison!"

"Well, we began reading classes," the other one said, "Sarah taught school before she retired. Then that led to a Bible study group in the evening. We're up to three Bible study groups a week. Two friends of ours who can't get out bake cookies for the boys. We've also enlisted two wonderful nurses to help with the VD. Some of them said those cookies are the first gift they've ever received."

"And you want the conference to take responsibility for this ministry?" I asked with bureaucratic indifference.

"No, we don't want to mess it up," Sarah responded.

"You need me to come up with some money for you?" I persisted, icily.

"Don't need any money. If we need something we get it from our little church," she said.

"Then why have you come down here to tell me this?" I asked.

"Well, we know that being a bishop must be one of the most depressing jobs in the church – too many things that we are not doing that Jesus expects us to do. So Gladys thought it would be nice if we came down here to tell you to take heart. Something's going right, that is, up in Cullman."

We could share a lot of stories along similar lines, things going right around here: the sewing group, the mission trip to Alabama, VBS helpers, Habitat builders. What becomes clear is that Christian service isn't an occasional venture or special project, it's an attitude – a lifestyle. It's taking

our responsibility as Christians seriously: our ability to respond to the merciful goodness of God.

As Bishop Anderson relates it, this business of serving and caring for others will at times entail sacrifice: it did for Jesus; it did for the Twelve. Are you and I any different, any better?

St. Paul knew from his long ministry that serving others can and will include a measure of sacrifice and suffering. But he knew it was not in vain, “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. . .”

The love that draws us to Christ is the love that also sustains us in our serving. And so we do not lose heart.

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If the church existed only to meet our needs, then its survival would not be critical. But because the church exists to do Christ’s ministry, to be a means of grace in this world – it is essential.

Serving others is not something optional or for the few – it is central to our identity.

It is our calling, our privilege, our responsibility to be a blessing in this world.

As you ponder the many ways God has blessed you – be actively looking for ways to be a blessing and live the Gospel.

Amen.