

Sermon by ELCIC National Bishop Susan C. Johnson Saskatchewan Synod - Closing Worship June 15, 2008

Genesis 18:1-15 Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 Romans 5:1-8 Matthew 9:35-10:8

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.'

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

It is a real privilege to be here with you, and I bring you greetings from your sisters and brothers in Christ from coast to coast to coast that make up this part of the family of God we call the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. I want to thank you all so very much for the wonderful hospitality you have shown me.

I had the privilege of being in South Africa at the end of February for meetings between representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the International Lutheran Council and I was honoured to be asked to preach at the Cathedral in Soweto on the Sunday. I noticed at several points during the service that people were making a certain hand gesture, raising up an arm and shaking their hand back and forth. I wasn't sure what they were doing and was afraid to join in lest I be making some rude gesture. At the end of the service I asked about it and was told that they don't think it's polite to clap in worship and so they use this gesture instead. So to all of you, especially all of you good people here at Messiah, I want to say (show gesture).

One other thing. In South Africa the people actually smiled when they sang songs praising God! And they actually moved to the music! We are not called to be God's chosen frozen!!

In today's Gospel lesson, we see Jesus, out and about doing his work, proclaiming the good news, preaching, teaching, and healing the sick. And Jesus becomes aware that it is a big task that has been set before him. So he calls his disciples and sends them out to help with the work. And obedient as they are, the disciples do go out and do proclaim the good news, preaching, teaching and healing.

But what I'm really interested in, is how do **we** react when we hear this lesson? What response is evoked in us? What thoughts and emotions run through our minds and hearts? Let me suggest a few possibilities.

First of all, there is the response where we go, "that's nice." This is a great story about Jesus and the disciples, and it happened two thousand years ago and it's over. And we leave it at that. No problem.

A second possible response is that we understand it to be about calling and sending disciples, and we are aware that probably the work of Jesus is not over yet and so we might need some more disciples in this day and age, but undoubtedly what is being talked about here is **PROFESSIONAL** disciples. You know, pastors, or diaconal ministers, or missionaries. And so this doesn't apply to you and me. Big relief, thank you, next item on the agenda please.

Or there is another response where we understand that perhaps we are talking about discipleship in general, and that probably there are implications for all Christians, and that is going to include each one of us. And then the usual reaction is guilt and fear. Guilt in that we hear that one particular verse, the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few, and we start to think that a big finger is being pointed directly at us, and we start to look at our lives and we realize that there probably is more that we could be doing, and undoubtedly we are letting Jesus down. And fear because we are really worried that someone is going to come up to us and ask us to do something that we don't really want to do or feel we are capable of doing and because of this overwhelming guilt we are feeling we're going to give in and end up resenting it later.

And the next thing you know, in the midst of our guilt and fear we start playing the rating game, and turn discipleship into a competition. Where do we fit in the scale of discipleship? Are we at the top? Or are we at the bottom? And suddenly we start comparing ourselves to everyone around us. OK, I'm on more committees at church than that one, oh, but that one undoubtedly gives more, and there is the community work that one does, and so on and so on.

Okay, let's stop for a minute, take a deep breath and relax. There are some other things we need to look at in today's lessons before we go into a huge guilt festival. I think this text is about being called to discipleship. And I think it is applicable to everyone here, not just a select few. We are all called to fall in behind the ranks of the countless disciples of Jesus that go all the way back to the original 12. We are all called to be a church in mission for others. But before we get on that cycle of guilt, fear, competition and rating again, let me talk to you about a few things.

First of all, we need to put things in perspective. When we get into our guilt/fear/competition/rating mode we put ourselves in the middle of the picture. But did you hear the words of the Gospel lesson? "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest." What Jesus is reminding us is that it is God's work that we are undertaking. It is not our own work, rather we are called to assist in God's work, acting as God's agents of love and care. God is responsible for the harvest, and though we are called to work for it, ultimately its success or failure does not rest on any one of us as individuals.

Secondly, it is God who will call the labourers to the harvest. God will call and direct you in your discipleship if you ask. And, of course, the way we do that is by prayer. We pray that we will be guided in our discipleship.

But once the direction is clear, that is not the end either. Did you hear what Jesus did for the disciples? He empowered them for their task. He summoned the twelve and equipped them with the skills and abilities they needed to go out and do the task set for them. And God will equip us as well to do the tasks we are called to perform. Think what that means for a minute.

We do not have to compare ourselves with those around us because we do not know what their call may be or even what gifts they have been given to equip them for that call.

Okay, but having been given a direction for ministry and mission, having been equipped with gifts and talents that will enable us to carry out the job, there is still another stumbling block. Fear. Fear that we will not be able do it. Fear that we will mess up. Fear that we will disappoint ourselves, God, other people.

As you may have guessed, today's lessons give us an answer to our fears as well! In the first lesson, Sarah is so overcome by the preposterousness of what God is proposing for her and Abraham that she laughs out loud!! And can you blame her? 90 years old and facing motherhood for the first time? And even though Sarah and Abraham faithfully accepted this challenge, and this not being the first thing that God has asked of them!!, it wasn't long afterwards that they end up messing up again. Look ahead a couple of chapters and you will see them turning out Hagar and Ismael into the wilderness. Even those with great faith sometimes mess up.

And we know that it was the same thing in the case of the disciples, the original 12. They also had great intentions and poor follow through. They too messed up, had difficulty, got turned around, tried to get back on track. Here too we see a contrast between their willingness to follow Jesus and their ability do so consistently.

The point, my friends, is that we are not called to be perfect. The God who created us, who made each of us the unique individuals we are, the God who has given us a rainbow of different gifts and talents, knows us inside and out. And God knows our human weakness and frailty. God knows that no matter how hard we try, no matter how committed and dedicated we are we will mess up. We will make mistakes. And the wonder is that God calls us anyhow. St. Paul reminds us of that wonder in the second lesson from his letter to the Romans where he

reminds us that God's love for us is proven in the fact that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us.

God loves us knowing our weaknesses. God calls us knowing that we will sometimes fail.

And that is what frees us from fear to go out and answer the call. And God will be with us,
bearing us up on eagle's wings, just as God was with the children of Israel.

We pray to be guided in our discipleship. We pray to be equipped for the work we are called to do. We pray that we will be given the strength and compassion to live out our willingness to serve, to be a church *In Mission for Others*!! And when we mess up, as mess up we will, we pray for forgiveness, for renewed vision and energy, and for courage to start again. Amen.