

January 27, 2013
Matthew 10:1-8; 18-20
Called To What
Rev. Adrienne Carr

This unit of the Church School Curriculum is focused on the Call to mission of the Disciples as described in Matthew's Gospel. I have to say that this is a passage that brings back memories of my being sent to Taiwan along with three other Maryknoll Sisters. The disciples walked, carrying only what they needed. We flew with a couple of suitcases filled with clothing, books, supplies and whatever we thought might come in handy. They ate what was given them on the way. We also ate what was given to us; however, in those by-gone days of elegant flight, we ate airline food that actually tasted good. The disciples entered towns and only stayed where they were welcome. We entered a hostel run by an Italian order of nuns for Chinese college students and missionaries in language school. The disciples went out and preached the words of Christ. We stayed in and Chinese teachers came to us attempting to give us enough language so we wouldn't cause an international incident simply by opening our mouths.

As we studied, we got to know some of the Chinese students and during school breaks, we toured the country, visiting cities and towns where our missions were located. There were many programs in place in all those areas. For generations, Protestant and Catholic missionaries went out to convert the "heathen" peoples of the world. Primarily through establishing schools, hospitals and orphanages the missionaries encountered those non-Christian people and, following the model of the twelve disciples, convinced listeners to accept and believe in the teachings of Christ. Today if you look at a world map, the results of that model are obvious. Large parts of Africa, all of Latin America, the Philippines, and Oceania are Christian. In South Korea, almost 30% of the population is Christian. In China, about 5% is Christian. Although small in actual numbers, Christianity is the third largest religion in India. These statistics represent almost two hundred years of the faithful zeal of Protestant missionary families and Catholic nuns and priests.

We cannot discount the lives of all of those dedicated individuals and the sacrifices that they made in their years of faithful discipleship. Separated from family and friends, often ignored by local communities, subject to diseases for which there was no immunity, and consequently, deaths of children and mothers in childbirth, the missionary life was truly a sacrificial gift. Today, immigrant communities throughout our country display the worth of missionary discipleship in churches named Korean Methodist Church or Taiwanese Presbyterian Church, Samoan United Church of Christ or Transfiguration Catholic Church.

There is a new understanding of discipleship that has spread across denominational lines. It was in place when I was in Taiwan in 1970. It began as awareness that God's truth is not limited to Christianity and that the teachings of Christ are reflected in the core beliefs of other religions. It began for me with a

Bodhisattva. On one of our trips, around Taiwan, we were taken to a Buddhist Temple and introduced to the Goddess Kwan Yin. Kwan Yin is a Bodhisattva, a human who has achieved total enlightenment and can cross into the state of Nirvana. Kwan Yin chose not to enter that sublime state but to remain as a guide and support for mortals. She is known in English as the Goddess of Mercy. The statue in that temple portrayed a woman whose face reflected compassion for all who came in search of comfort. Having grown up with statues of the Virgin Mary in church and in my home, I found a connection that crossed religious borders, the universal awareness of the compassion of the Divine.

I began to reflect on what else we have in common. What core truths do we share? What are the universal values that permeate the teachings of all religions? Must discipleship be exclusive or is it inclusive? My thoughts were not unique. Some times heated Theological discussions addressed the universality of God. What if the one God has many names: Yahweh, Vishna, Ahura Masda, Allah or even, Nirvana? If we begin to accept the Divine presence in all religion, how do we go about being disciples? Do we proclaim that 'my way is better?' Or do we recognize eternal truths in all expressions of belief? I chose the latter.

Today, across mainline denominations, women and men still leave the comforts of home to go across the world and live in cities and villages as companions to the people of those areas. Rather than build churches, they help construct wells or open clinics or simply live as their neighbors live. They live with empathy and compassion and friendship. They live simply and do without the bells and whistles of our everyday lives. They learn from their neighbors how to live with dignity in the midst of poverty and injustice. They learn by receiving and grow humble in that education. And they return to their homes and communities to witness to the pain, suffering, joy and sense of community that they have experienced in their place of mission. In doing all this, they live out the teaching of Christ and their actions are eloquent.

We have folks right here in this church who do not hesitate to go when help is needed.: to Africa, to India, to Haiti, to Mississippi, to flood ravaged Vermont. Our youth have seen the reality of poverty and hunger in cities and rural areas and return to Vermont with a new sense of the other reality. In all those travels, it has not mattered if a program is Baptist or Catholic or secular. What has always mattered is mutual respect and willingness to learn as well as give.

So, what does all of this mean to you and me? For me. It once meant getting on a plane and going to Taiwan but it also meant coming home with a commitment to live as well as possible the teachings of Christ. I have not always been successful but I have done my best. And most of us are not going to get on planes and fly to war torn, flood savaged, poverty-ridden places of this earth. We don't need to go that far to ease burdens and share hope. We are all called to 'walk the talk' and to do so in a profoundly simple way. We are called to live the message of Christ as if we really believed it. If we have questions about what those teachings are, there are two Gospel passages that define the actions of a disciple.

Luke writes: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as

yourself.'" (10:27) If we need more explicit instructions, we turn to Matthew who describes the last judgment, listing those actions that mark discipleship:

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' (Matt. 25:31-46)

In short, Discipleship is an on-going act of love.

Today we lift up one of our programs, The Possibility Shop. What a great name. On Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays the midway is filled with a diverse mix of students, refugees, folks with limited budgets, moms with little kids and not a few bargain hunters. The possibilities are endless. There are clothing surprises, household wonders, books galore, sewing supplies, occasional wedding gowns or golf clubs or suitcases. You never know what you might find when you walk down the stairs into the shop.

'What,' you might ask, 'does this shop have to do with discipleship?' The short answer is, 'Everything.' Begun by Nancy Lawrence from a rummage sale, the Shop has been run solely by volunteers who sort donations, price clothing, keep the racks filled, assist customers and run the cash register. The donated clothing and goods come from you and many people, not necessarily members, from all over the community. Among the shoppers are Joint Urban Ministry clients who have been given a voucher to pick up baby clothes or a warm coat or a pair of shoes. The Possibility Shop honored over Five thousand dollars worth of vouchers this year.

It takes love and commitment to be a Possibility Shop Volunteer. There are days when it seems as though everybody in northern Vermont is shopping and the cash register line is endless. There are days when a shopper who is lonely stays and talks while clothes need sorting or pricing but the volunteer listens with compassion because that is what Christ taught disciples to do. Sometimes volunteers are out sick and only two or three are present. Those days are tiring but at the end of the day, they don't quit. They'll be back for their next shift.

To care for the poor, to welcome the stranger, to clothe those who need the winter coat on 15 below winter days, is the work of discipleship. And the only reward that volunteers get is a soup and salad lunch in December. These Disciples may be the only church connection that most of the customers have. With their warmth, patience and welcoming words, it is enough. So the possibilities are indeed endless for a customer who finds the coat and the warm smile of support. That customer feels less anonymous, less alone. The possibilities are endless for the volunteer who opens her or himself up to the experience of meeting another person across racial, ethnic or economic divides and discovers the common bond of humanity that unites all of us. The possibilities are endless for all those who fill the bin with donations. A shirt that no longer fits is found by someone who needs a good shirt for a job interview and you gave that person a step into new life. Even though you will never know that person, your lives have connected for the good. The possibilities are endless.

Poet Elizabeth Alexander wrote a Poem for President Obama's first inauguration. As I was coming to church last Sunday, I heard these words of hers on the PBS program, On Being:

... What if the mightiest word is love?
Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that casts a widening pool of light,
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.
In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,
praise song for walking forward in that light.

What if the mightiest word is Love? What power lies in Love? What miracles could be accomplished with love? We will never know until we have the strength to let it be so. Amen.