

“You Are the Miracle”

June 18, 2017

Rev. Sally May

First Congregational Church UCC of Burlington

Matthew 9:35-10:23 (NRSV):

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 laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers 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. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

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This morning's lectionary text has many twists. The reading begins with "Then Jesus." Before the "then" there is a story about Jesus healing a blind man. A story about Jesus performing a miracle. This is not Jesus' first miracle. There are many similar stories in Matthew. What is fascinating though is the next "then" Then Jesus summoned his disciples - and gave them the authority over unclean spirits, and to cure every disease and every sickness. Yet as these men are named the author does not address them as disciples but as apostles. A disciple is a student, an apostle is a follower - In a sentence these people have gone from learning from Jesus to being asked to do what Jesus does.

In this particular text the apostles are not asked to convert people but to go among those already like them - among the Jews. They are not expected to be financially supported in their ministry among the people, nor to take any provisions such as money, clothing, sandals, a staff. The apostles are then to find someone within the city or village to stay with and once in the home to stay regardless of the situation one finds himself in. No apostle though is to try to convince someone to let them in. In fact, if they are not welcome they are to shake the dust from their feet as they leave the house. If the village or town itself is unwelcome they are to do the same.

Another twist follows where the author describes Jesus as warning the apostles, his disciples, that the world is a cruel place BUT that faith is what will carry you. "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves.... When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say for what you are to say will be given to you..." Jesus tells them that they are conduits for God's voice.

Considering this text in its historical context, it is clear that these Jesus followers lived under very precarious conditions. Their faith told them to go into the world to alleviate the suffering of others, to heal the sick, to share the Good News, to feed and care for the widow and the orphan, give sight to the blind; to give their lives for the lives of others - give up their possessions, their homes, their families for the betterment of others, of the world. To do that expecting to be persecuted, tortured, imprisoned.

Now, as my time with all of you comes to an end and I have the opportunity to share my thoughts with you three times in the next month, I debated if there were themes of my experiences and time with you that I wanted to share. So I considered not using this standard text for this week from the Revised Common Lectionary. And when I first read this text I thought A) - it's too long and B) it's kinda a downer and scary to read, and C) there's so much depth and exegesis, breaking down and understanding that can be done. Much more than can be done in these few moments. Yet, the more I read it, studied it, studied about it, there is something about it that resonated with me and with my sense of you, of this church, of Church in the 21st century. All of us are trying to figure out what we can do to build the church. To bring people in. To keep from dying. What gimmicks will attract people? What events can we host so people will come to this building? What programs can we offer to help people with our limited resources of time and money? This is not unique to this church - churches everywhere are trying to figure out how they fit into the communities in which they live.

Today's scripture tells me that perhaps we have it all wrong. Perhaps it is not about what we can offer, what we do, or the building. It is not about "what," but about "who". Who are we? Individually and collectively. How can we serve?

The opening paragraph from today's reading says so much. The author tells that Jesus is a teacher, preacher, and healer. And then he writes "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were

harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." And then he called the disciples to join him and gave *them* authority to heal. This tells me that Jesus' ministry, what we call his miracle work, was rooted in compassion. Compassion for others. He saw the suffering and could not not respond. And he called those he had taught, to do the same. To live in love; in compassion - They needed nothing more than their love of God and trust in Jesus, and concern for others to do the work of Jesus, to teach, to preach, and to perform miracles - curing the sick and casting out demons. They, the disciples, their compassion, their will to live out what they had learned from Jesus were the miracles.

Does that not continue to be true today? Are you not the miracle? Can not your compassion help feed a hungry person, demand justice in the face of injustice, free a prisoner, offer hope in suffering?

As you know, we all have had some rocky times together. When I first came to this church, as I shared at the time, I sensed grief. I also sensed a lack of confidence, self-esteem by you as a congregation. Clergy and staff primarily managed all aspects of the church. A large church requires management, certainly. Yet, I sensed hesitation, uncertainty from you, individually and collectively, to be buoyed up and both lead and be led by your passions and compassion. I am not suggesting that everyone just up and does her/his own thing. Please don't do that. Each of you is part of a larger whole - you are a community. Some of you have heard me say I think this church would be well-served by more collaboration among varied groups and interests - collaboration of time, talents and treasures. I both sense that it has and I have seen it gradually change with increased lay voice and involvement in worship, in meetings, in being and doing church - from lay readers to lawn mowers, from gardeners to educators. You seem both stronger and more comfortable about who you are, and who you want to be.

Today's text is complicated in many ways with twists and turns. In some way it seems to want to separate peoples. The wolves and the sheep. Yet it is also very simple. It's message, for me today, is to be led by faith to live in love. Do not ask or expect a miracle to happen to you, to come to you or to this church. Do not expect a perfect world. Rather, as Gandhi said, recognize that you are the change that you want to see in the world. This text offers an opportunity to realize that *you* are the miracle, as Jesus and the apostles were. Let people see. No, strike that. Help people *experience* a miracle. Spend time with one another. Laugh together. Have fun. Support one another. And do the same in your community, in this community. As it was in @70 ad, it is a cruel world in many ways for people of faith. That the church grew from what we heard in today's reading to what it became is a miracle. A miracle of the people who had deep faith and abiding love for God and one another. As American Christians, we are blessed with freedom and lack of persecution. But we are kidding ourselves if we deny our hesitation to share our faith in the public sphere. We are kidding ourselves if we don't acknowledge that we worry about money in the context of how to live out our faith. We are kidding ourselves if we historically have not had to work out the details of a mission or ministry before heading into the streets and simply loving our neighbors. I have been in many meetings and had several conversations that begin with reasons for not doing something before offering the benefits and rightness of doing something.

Imagine doing ministry trusting only in you - not in the building, not in your financial state, not in your clergy, not in your lay leadership, not in your staff, but in you. What might that look like individually and as one community of faith with no one greater or lesser than another? What does that *feel* like? Does the very idea terrify you or excite you? In the movie, *Evan Almighty* God asks Evan's wife, Joan Baxter, in the midst of a family crisis a question. Actually a series of questions. God asks Joan, "Let me ask you something. If someone prays for patience, you think God gives them patience? Or does [God] give them the opportunity to be patient? If he prayed for courage, does God give him courage, or does [God] give him opportunities to be courageous? If someone prayed for the family to be closer, do you think God zaps them with warm fuzzy feelings, or does [God] give them opportunities to love each other?"¹

¹ *Evan Almighty*: Director, Tom Shadyac; Writer Steve Oedeker. Universal Pictures. 2007.

May you continue to ask what opportunities are there for you to serve. To show your compassion, share your faith.

As it was 2000 years ago, "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." There are plenty of people who continue to be "harassed and helpless." Now, as then, Jesus, is calling on you to join in the labor of love, of compassion, of justice. To perform miracles.... to be a miracle.

The Rev. Dr. MLK, Jr. wrote: "Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's "Theory of Relativity" to serve. You don't have to know the Second Theory of Thermal Dynamics in Physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love."²

May each of you and this church go forth with your hearts filled with grace, souls moved by love, bodies willing, and minds needing to act in the world. That is how miracles happen and who you are called to be.

² Excerpted from "The Drum Major Instinct", a sermon by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1968. Available in *A Knock At Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*