Testing a Call

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Text: Matt 9:35 – 10:8

Our gospel reading for today begins in the middle of Jesus’ ministry. According to Matthew, the disciples who are sent out to teach and preach consist of twelve men who are specifically named. They are given spiritual power to heal and cast out demons. They are to travel light, depend on the welcome of “worthy” people, and simply leave if nobody responds to their teaching. This is a trial run, so to speak. A time to test their call. We don’t actually know how that turned out.

They have been traveling with Jesus for some time, listening to his teaching, watching his welcome for all kinds of people, and absorbing the practical, everyday meaning that God’s realm is *close at hand*.

Their message? God’s realm is not in the far distant future, reserved for a few scrupulous followers of the Law. That was a revolutionary teaching then, and it still is. Who can watch the news and believe that God’s realm is here and now? And yet, that is our hope and our common call as members of Eighth Day and in the wider Church of the Saviour community.

**In Matthew’s text,** the disciples are sent out “like sheep among wolves.” It seems like a pretty straightforward call to evangelize in a hostile world, and when I was growing up, that’s how I heard this story.

Then, when an article by Elizabeth O’Connor fell into my hands, I caught a glimpse of something quite different in this text. The article, published in *Faith@Work* magazine in 1965, was titled “What We Need is More Saints.” It described the disciplined life of a small group of people, men and women, who were called to a single project. Elizabeth called them mission groups.

These “saints” were not especially holy people. They were not even especially good people, nice people, or skilled people. In fact, it sounded like a group of people being shaped by their life together — by their inward/outward journey together — and it sounded like good news to me. I wanted to know others like that who took their faith seriously.

My own experience of church had been anchored in music — not call, gifts, ministry and reflection. I thought ministry was what the pastor did. Laypeople filled committees, volunteered for projects, and provided help for those in need, but quite honestly, church was not about changing the trajectory of one’s life or working together to *be* a living, breathing body of Christ.

When we arrived here in 1976, the first thing I noticed was that nobody was “looking for volunteers.” Instead, people asked about call — what was your passion, your dream for those at the margins — people who were being overlooked or rejected by our socio-political structures — the very people Jesus invited to the table.

I didn’t have a ready answer about my call in those days, so I began taking classes in the School of Christian Living. Each twelve-week class became a kind of intimate community. We took turns arriving early to prepare the meal and clean up afterwards, and the classes provided a framework for exploring our gifts, reflecting on and writing about my inner life, and sharing that journey with others.

**Now I see** that the school gave us a time-limited experience of mission group life. The inward journey involved study, prayer and writing. The outward journey involved making time and space for showing up, ready to interact, and the community dimension was choosing to be open, vulnerable, and ready to be changed. I was learning how to love beyond the usual patterns of social class and common interest.

The questions about call kept surfacing in conversations with other church members. After a couple of classes in the school, I joined the mission group that sponsored the school (which stayed under the umbrella of Church of the Saviour at first) because that seemed to be where my gifts and concern for others took root. As a former teacher, it was something I cared about and could offer to others.

**In the gospel reading for today**, I can imagine that the early disciples might have joined the group around Jesus for much the same reason: they felt seen and heard in his company. Not just by Jesus, but by others who were drawn to him as well. Over time and exposure to Jesus’ radical welcome, they became both midwives and messengers of God’s presence.

**Notice that** Jesus did not send them out right away to proclaim the kingdom of God. They had spent a couple of years with him, day in and day out, being stretched, shocked, challenged and even chastised for their slowness to understand — before they were ready to *be* good news to others,

We also know that there was a group of women who traveled with the disciples, supporting them out of “their means,” which means that they offered financial support and valuable connections as well. At a time when Matthew only recorded the names of twelve men, other texts document the presence and leadership of women as well. Today I would expect to find a rainbow spectrum of racial and gender identities among the disciples as well.

**Sacrificial giving** of time, talent and money is an element of call that we often avoid, but Gordon Cosby spoke of giving as a way to break the bondage of a consumer society. Gordon was really the spiritual father of the wider Church of the Saviour community, and we can honor him for that. Gordon knew that detachment from the power of getting and spending money is a need for both rich and poor people.

Attention to *call* became a powerful motivation for sharing our wealth — not only of money, but experience, connections and possibilities. People were drawn here because it *was* good news in action. New models for social change developed. Servant leaders did emerge from the disciplined life that characterized Church of the Saviour. We discovered change *is* possible. We learned to pool our resources of money *and* experience in order to create new models of love-in-action — like Dayspring, the Potter’s House, For Love of Children (FLOC), Jubilee Housing, Manna, and the Festival Center.

With a committed core of people, shaped by their inward/outward life together, each ministry could sustain a wide welcome for all who came.

**In some communities,** the need for that apprenticeship period is being questioned. Some are called to action before they have developed much capacity for loving as Jesus did. Others see the committed core as elitist and out-of-touch with current needs. But I see the wisdom in Jesus’ pattern of preparation for his disciples — to move them by direct experience from the limits of their cultural norms to the being workers in the harvest that the Spirit had already prepared for them. In a mission group, we can do both — be engaged in a particular mission *and* be reflecting on our life together with an eye toward inner growth and commitment.

**Because I chair** the Church of the Saviour Council, I want to share a bit about how we are still connected. We exist as a network of small churches, anchored by our common disciplines and shared ownership of the Dayspring property. Each church and mission group operates with the authority of its call. The Council functions as a place to share our lives together, as a common body of disciples, learning the ways of the Spirit as we go about our work in the world.

As Church of the Saviour, we have two regular publications: the weekly gospel reflection on the web at [*www.InwardOutward.org*](http://www.InwardOutward.org)*,* and the quarterly printed newsletter, *Callings*. Both are available, free of charge, to anyone who asks.

If you read the weekly gospel reflection on *InwardOutward.org*, you will have gotten Kate Lasso’s brief story yesterday of her Faith & Money trip to civil rights sites in the South. It ends with a special invitation to explore what the Hope Credit Union is doing for people in rural Mississippi, a place where credit and banking services have been unavailable. She writes that the trip brought her to this text with new eyes, because she could now see that God is calling new workers *from within* the harvest.

And if you aren’t reading Inward/Outward regularly, I invite you to pick up a copy of *Callings*. My editorial on page two includes the information about how to sign up. It’s a wonderful way to stay in touch with how the Spirit is at work in our wider Church of the Saviour community.

In *Callings*, I try to feature stories from the wider network of ministries that have grown out of Church of the Saviour in the past sixty years. There are plenty of copies here for each of you. During covid, a number of people opted to get this by mail, so I know some of you have already seen this latest issue.

**Going back to the text,** Jesus not only sent out his trained disciples to *be* good news in a world they did not create or control, but he cautioned them to stay where they are welcomed and move on if they are not. He was *not* interested in excluding people or forcing people to believe that God’s realm was very near. This message is the very opposite of Christian Nationalism, where one’s religious views become the law for others.

**One final thought about call**. It seems to me that, over time, one’s call takes on a spiral form, changing shape as we age and mature.

* Call begins with awakening to our identity as a particular part of God’s good creation.
* Only then do we learn, as the disciples did, what our real work is. That may not be the job we have to earn a living, but it will be the work that we know is ours to do.
* Out of that work, we may discover a unique gift that we will continue to offer in our later years, without the organizational structures of an earlier time. That spiritual development gives meaning and purpose to aging.
* And finally, our call becomes the legacy that we leave behind — in the lives of others who will outlive us.

No matter where you are in the spiral of God’s call in your life, we can trust that the realm of God is here and now, with each breath that brings us alive.
Amen.