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Road Trip! Great Journeys in the Bible VII. Are We There Yet?

Matthew 10:1-15 The Message translation Jesus called twelve of his followers and sent them into the ripe fields. He gave them power to kick out the evil spirits and to tenderly care for the bruised and hurt lives. This is the list of the twelve he sent: Simon (they called him Peter, or "Rock"), Andrew, his brother, James, Zebedee's son, John, his brother, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, the tax man, James, son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon, the Canaanite, Judas Iscariot (who later turned on him). Jesus sent his twelve harvest hands out with this charge: "Don't begin by traveling to some far-off place to convert unbelievers. And don't try to be dramatic by tackling some public enemy. Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighborhood. Tell them that the kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out the demons. You have been treated generously, so live generously. Don't think you have to put on a fund-raising campaign before you start. You don't need a lot of equipment. You are the equipment, and all you need to keep that going is three meals a day. Travel light. When you enter a town or village, don't insist on staying in a luxury inn. Get a modest place with some modest people, and be content there until you leave. When you knock on a door, be courteous in your greeting. If they welcome you, be gentle in your conversation. If they don't welcome you, quietly withdraw. Don't make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and be on your way."

We've all seen instructions where we wish we knew the story behind them.

Recently, my Twitter feed showed me an instructional sign at the entrance of a library that said *"Due to recent events, please refrain from bringing Oreos into the library."*

When I was called to my first full-time church out of seminary, a little church in a small West Texas town, my contract was clearly one that had been used previously; in those pre-word processing days, there were several items added on to the end of that contract, each in different typefaces that showed they'd been added at different points in time and then photocopied. Some of the items in that contract included: *"Pastor will mow the lawn of the parsonage at least every two weeks"* and *"Pastor will not run an auto repair business in the driveway of the parsonage."* I never did find out what was the story behind those two provisions. The instructions I once saw on a hammer made me yearn to know the story behind them: *"Not for internal use."*

Today's scripture, the latest in our summer sermon series on "great journeys in the Bible," is Matthew's version of the commissioning of Jesus' disciples as He sends them on their first "road trip" to share the good news. And this story, too, contains a very detailed set of instructions from Jesus that also have a context, a story, behind them. So, let's dig a little deeper and see what those instructions might have to say to us, for I think they are telling us three things about our faith and what God is calling us to do on our journeys as ones who would also follow Jesus.

The first thing is for us to notice for this set of instructions from Jesus as he sends the disciples out on their first solo mission trips is indeed the context that appears a few verses before our scripture for today. In Chapter 9, Jesus has gone about the countryside, preaching, teaching, and healing. And after doing so, and immediately before today's scripture, Matthew tell us this:

When [Jesus] looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd. "What a huge harvest!" he said to his disciples. "How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!"
(Matthew 9:36-38 The Message).

The context, then, for Jesus' instructions is the situation of too many people knowing too little of the possibility of life abundant, too many people without hope, too many people living, as Henry David Thoreau said 19 centuries later, "*lives of quiet desperation and [who] go to the grave with the[ir] song[s] still in them.*" I want you to notice two things here: The first is the implication of Jesus' words that God needs our help. Now, that may sound startling, but it's true. Our God created a world full of beauty and possibility and imbued creation and human beings with free will. And too much misuse of free will has often led, then and now, to too many lives that are hurting. Too much much misuse of free will, then and now, led to a society where the rich got richer and richer while the poor struggled more and more for basic dignity. Too much

misuse of free will, then and now, resulted in a culture of increasing violence, increasing racism, where, today, in our country, African Americans are three times as likely to be searched or have physical force applied against them in a traffic stop and twice as likely to be arrested as white people¹ and four times more likely to be followed by security in a store.² The misuse of that free will has led to a situation where 1500 children are killed with a gun every year, 28,000 in the last ten years, 13 children dead from a gun for every American soldier killed in the Afghanistan war.³ Too much misuse of free will means that one in four women will experience domestic violence.⁴ Too much misuse of free will has led to a society where too many people based, sadly, on too much evidence, think that if you are a Christian that must mean you are a bigot. Yes, Jesus' words are startling but oh-so-true: God needs us; the harvest is plentiful and ripe indeed for those who would be the hands and voice of God by advocating for responsible public health and security practices and for actions which show that the God whom we worship is not a judgmental bully, but a caring friend whose gracious love extends to each and every person. Period.

The second thing to note in this passage, though, is the irony of what happens. Jesus tells the disciples to pray for workers to help God and then, a few verses later as seen in our scripture, their prayers are answered when Jesus says *"It's you guys who are the workers that you have just prayed for!"* You should be careful of what you pray for because something you get it! "Sometimes," as one preacher puts it, "the answer

¹http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/rd_Black_Lives_Matter.pdf

²http://www.consumerequality.com/pubs/09_Shopping_While_Black.pdf

³<http://www.nationwidechildrens.org/cirp-gun-safety> and <http://gunwars.news21.com/2014/at-least-28000-children-and-teens-were-killed-by-guns-over-an-11-year-period/>

⁴<http://www.safehorizon.org/page/domestic-violence-statistics--facts-52.html>

to your prayer is 'You.'"⁵ Now, lest you are thinking that that lets you off the hook, that God is calling you to do no large, dramatic thing to address the hurt of this world, think again. One of our beloved long-time members of this congregation can't get to church as much as she used to. But, as some of you know, she prays daily for every single person, by name, whom she knows of in this congregation. And she also knows that the harvest that is before us is so much bigger than her own personal preferences; she once said to me, *"You know, I really dislike some of this 'new music.'* *But if it brings in new people, younger people, people who don't know God, then I will gladly sing it."* Some in our congregation, seeing the waiting harvest before us, have also prayed to God about how they can be workers and God answered them and told them to help build chicken coops for Native Americans, or to volunteer at ESM, or to write regular letters to their legislators demanding that they serve the public good, or make sure that every grocery visit includes items for Springs Rescue Mission, or a resolve to break down the walls that divide, as St. Paul says, by refusing to laugh at racist jokes, by refusing to forward mean and nasty characterizations of leaders, or who summon up their courage to share an invitation to First Christian when they run into someone who is struggling with life and who knows too little of grace.

The hotel where I stayed last week in Columbus, Ohio, during the General Assembly had a staff member whom I will not forget. Every morning as I and others left the hotel, he was in the lobby and greeted each person this way: *"Good morning! It's a beautiful day. Go out and claim it."* To those of us wearing our church convention name-tags, he added a line to that greeting. *"Go out and claim it. Go out and claim the day for God."* This affable African-American gentleman said those lines with a smile to each and every guest, whatever their color or race, whether they were by themselves or in a group, whether they were a same-sex couple holding hands, or a tired a grumpy

⁵ <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt9x35.htm>

solo convention-goer. *“Go out and claim the day for God.”* I have to think that he had indeed heard Jesus’ instructions and also heard Jesus’ response that the answer to his prayer was him.

But that leads me to the third thing I want to say about this passage of instructions from Jesus. Sometimes despite having prayed, despite having heard God’s response that we ourselves are the answer to our prayers, despite our best efforts to go out and claim the day for God and share God’s grace with someone who is hurting or to try to change an evil social order, we will fail. We will fail. Sometimes even with the best of intentions, even with the most sincere of attitudes, even when our words are just right, we will fail. We will meet indifference. We will meet hostility even, from those who have been wounded by others in the past who claimed the label “Christian” but used it as a club instead of a comfort. What then?

Well, Jesus had some instructions for that too. Did you hear them? Petersen translates them this way: *“When you knock on a door, be courteous in your greeting. If they welcome you, be gentle in your conversation. If they don’t welcome you, quietly withdraw. Don’t make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and be on your way.”* The more traditional translations say this: *“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”* (NRSV). A very wise English Methodist preacher by the name of Sam Wells says this: Sometimes

You don’t know why... your efforts are met with indifference. Shake the dust off your feet. Don’t assume this is all about you -- it’s not a personal vote against you.... Shake the dust off your feet.... Don’t carry that dust everywhere you go, embittering relationships, souring friendships, sapping energy, leaking hope....Shake the dust off your feet.⁶

The most important line in Well’s words are these: *“It’s not about you.”* If it were, there

⁶<http://www.faithandleadership.com/samuel-wells-shaking-dust>

would be too much reason to despair. For it is, indeed, a “dusty” world. And what is dust? Dry earth, dead skin, lifeless leavings of what once was. And while we can do very little with dust – except vacuum it up and move it around – **God** can do so much more. The Book of Genesis poetically tells us God created the first human “from the dust” (that’s the literal meaning of the name “Adam”) and the point of that story is that *God can and does and will create new life from what was apparently lifeless*. It’s not about you, for if it were, if the Good News depended only on your words, then there would be reason to despair in the face of the world’s “dustiness,” in the face of indifference and even hostility to the witness you’ve tried to bear.

That’s exactly the point at which you give it over to God. Again, hear Rev. Wells’ words:

God [can yet] make... something beautiful out of our dust and ashes.... Shaking [the] dust is a prayer that God will do a miracle by making beauty arise from ashes and making life come from the dust of the earth. You have prepared the way of the Lord; that’s all you can do.⁷

But sometimes, that is what you get and God will indeed help make it enough.

So my friends, to close, know these three things: First, that God needs you; for the harvest is indeed ripe. Second, **you** are the answer to *your prayer and to God’s* prayer. **You** are one of the workers that God needs to address the hopelessness, the hurt, the poverty, the pain, the violence, the bigotries of this world. So go and claim the day for God. But also know, third, at the same time, that it’s not about you, it doesn’t depend solely on your talents, your words, your actions. For, to answer the question of this sermon’s title, sometimes the dust is too much, sometimes the dust is too real, and “we are not there yet.” But God can yet do amazing things with dust, God can yet

Ibid.

breathe life into what looked lifeless. And so, both for our commission and for the knowledge that God goes with us and works through us and works beyond us in ways that we can't even imagine – thanks be to God indeed! Amen.