

Matthew 9:35-10:10
6/18/17—Pentecost 2A

Psalm 116:1-2, 5-6, 8, 17-19
Romans 5:1-8

God's Work

Many years ago, on a beautiful summer weekend much like this one, several college-age friends went on a road trip to a popular beach community in another state. In the group was one particular girl who came along for the ride. She was a passenger in someone else's Volkswagen Beetle. Someone else did the navigating. Someone else figured out where to turn. Someone else drove across the huge bridge spanning a large body of water. Someone else negotiated the heavy traffic. This girl just rode in the car.

When the friends reached their destination, they had a wonderful time. They soaked up the sun and talked late into the night, after feasting at a clambake. But this girl—the one I mentioned before—she had a burger for supper instead of clams like the others.

So the next day, when everyone else had a major digestive upset from eating those clams, she was elected to drive the Volkswagen Beetle back to the city. She had only ridden along. She had only watched the driver. But now, she had to operate the

stick shift and the clutch herself. She had to drive the car. She had to do everything the driver had done.

In this Sunday's reading from Matthew's Gospel, that's how it is for those first twelve disciples of Jesus. They have been along for the ride—so to speak—with an itinerant preacher and teacher. With Jesus, as he travels the byways of Galilee. Doing the work of healing. Proclaiming a coming kingdom. The Twelve have watched.

Hmmm. Have you ever had the experience of trying to learn a new skill, and the person who was showing you said, “It’s easy—just watch me”? Did you feel that watching someone else is maybe not the easiest way to learn?

It seems to me that these Twelve, who have watched Jesus, must have been more than a little taken aback when he summons them. Earlier in this same Gospel narrative, Jesus has called his first disciples. But now he draws them close. Invites them to circle around him. He commissions them as his apostles. As those being *sent* to Israel's lost ones. Matthew wants to be sure his readers understand Jesus as God's Messiah, gathering the scattered sheep of Israel. Those first Gospel readers would have

picked up on the numerical symbolism: the twelve tribes of Israel to whom Jesus' twelve apostles are sent.

They're ordinary guys, ordinary people like you and I, these Twelve. They don't have any special education or training or skills. They've just been along for the ride. But all of a sudden, everything changes. All of a sudden, expectations are raised. All of a sudden, Jesus asks them to do that which previously only he has done.

Jesus asks them to do God's work. Do they look at him and at one another with uncertainty, panic, and fear? *Who, us? You want us to heal the sick, cleanse lepers, drive out demons? And raise the dead? How can we do these things, Lord? This is work that you do!*

Jesus commissions the Twelve to do what *he* has done. Matthew, writing for his early church, guides his first readers—and us, too—to the realization that Christ commissions *every one* of his followers to do what he has done. To do God's work. To proclaim the kingdom of heaven. To bring wholeness to this world. When we hear Christ's charge, don't *we* exchange anxious glances? Don't we wonder: *How can we do these things? This is God's work.*

How are ordinary people like you and I to do God's work? Jesus gives us marching orders. Sends us out on a journey. The thing is, we don't really know how to prepare for it.

Have you been on an out-of-town trip recently? If so, you probably packed a bag or two. You probably put in everything you'd need along the way and at your destination.

But wait a minute. What else is Jesus saying? He's telling you to travel light. He doesn't want you to be encumbered by a lot of baggage that's going to weigh heavily on you and slow you down.

So when Christ sends you out to do God's work, what *can* you take with you? What *will* you take with you? My brothers and sisters, today's Scriptures offer some hints.

When we go to do God's work, it's all about beginning with a foundation of prayer. The Bible shows us Jesus frequently withdrawing to a quiet place to commune with his Father. The gospels paint word-portraits of Jesus at prayer. Doesn't everyone of us who strive to be more like him yearn to grow into a deeper prayer life?

But as we get ready to do God's work, Jesus asks us to pray for something specific. We're to ask the Lord of the harvest to

send more workers into the fields. Vast fields. Ripe fields! But not enough laborers.

Jesus' harvest metaphor fits not only his time, but our time, too. He knows that in this nation alone are millions of people who don't know him, who've never heard about his redeeming love. Christ sends you out into this great harvest. You're being sent to do God's work. You're one of Christ's workers. But more are needed. Jesus calls you to make your efforts fruitful by undergirding them with prayer. Before you set out.

And when you do set out, you walk by faith. Faith goes with you on your journey to do God's work. All you do is rooted in faith. As Paul assures believers in Rome, it's faith that justifies. It's faith that makes us fallen human creatures right with God through the One who's come to bridge the separation that we ourselves have made. Blessed salvation comes through faith alone. And it's this same belief in Christ that enables you to "do works that [he has done] and, in fact, do greater works than these." Faith is the ground from which works spring.

And you have faith in Christ. It may surprise you to know that Christ has faith in *you!* Confidence in you. He sees in you what no one else can see. Remember, you didn't choose him.

He's chosen *you* to be his disciple—an ordinary human being, like those ordinary first followers. It's important that you know: God doesn't call equipped people. God equips called people.

God has given you a unique set of gifts for use in the ministry of doing God's work. No one else has this special combination of gifts. And you don't need to pack them in a suitcase, because you carry them with you wherever you go.

The One who has given gifts for the road ahead ensures that you lack nothing for the journey. The Twelve—and you and I—are not to take along wealth or possessions, or even a staff for self-defense. According to Jesus, these aren't needed. Trust in the One who will provide everything that's needed.

Trust the One in whom you go forth on good authority. The best authority. The authority of Christ. Who sends out his followers, you and me, with authority over powers that would possess, over powers that would enslave. You have been given authority to release and to deliver and to heal the brokenness of many who stand in desperate need. As a follower of Jesus, you are to be a restorer. You're sent out in his authority, given in your baptism. For every baptized Christian is a minister. A servant. A representative of Christ in this world.

And in this world, we carry with us not only the authority of Jesus, but also his compassion. Compassion means *suffering with*. In the compassion of a loving father for his child, we catch a glimpse of God's love. Loving makes you vulnerable. Loving made Jesus vulnerable. Limitless love makes Jesus all compassion, fills his heart with compassion for so many who are harassed and helpless. For strayed sheep who wander aimlessly. Who subsist without a Shepherd. When he walked this earth, Jesus didn't only *feel* compassion. Compassion moved him to *act*. And he calls you and me to do the same: to carry compassion in our hearts. And to be moved by it as we go to do the work that he has done—to multiply his ministries of love revealed through grace.

It's through him, through Jesus, that *we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand*. As we go into the world to do God's work, we take his grace with us. We have done nothing and can do nothing to earn this grace. Grace is freely given. It's free—but it isn't cheap.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains. “Cheap grace is...grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate...Costly grace calls us to

follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs us our lives. It is grace because it gives us the only true life.”

You and I have accepted this free gift of grace and all that comes with it. As we received without payment, we give without payment. We may not be asked to give *up* our lives, as Bonhoeffer gave his. But Jesus summons us to give *away* our lives in the loving service of his kingdom.

Because we are his followers! You and I are no longer just along for the ride. We’re committed to Christ—Christ himself. He’s part of us. We’re part of him. And we will never be the same.

So go. Take with you prayer and faith. Take the gifts he has given and trust him to provide all else that’s needful. Take his authority, that you received in baptism. Take his compassion and his grace.

For, in the words of Annie Johnston Flint, “Christ has no hands but our hands to do his work today. He has no feet but our feet to lead [them] in the way...We are the only Bible the careless world will read. We are the Lord’s last message, given in word and deed.”

Beloved, the harvest is plentiful. Go out into the harvest. Be Christ's hands of healing. Proclaim Christ's message. Spread the great good news! Share the almighty power and the everlasting love of Jesus Christ. Do God's work!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.