

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Sent out"

Scripture: Mark 6:1-12, Psalm 67

Opening Hymn: All hail the power of Jesus' name 363

Closing Hymn: Take my life and let it be 637

Children's Hymn: Lead me Jesus; I will follow 646

Choruses: In Christ Alone, Jesus, all for Jesus

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5th Sunday after the Epiphany

We all like simple plans.

Most of us prefer a singular approach.

'We need to focus on the economy.'

OR 'We need to focus on the environment.'

'We need to pay down the mortgage.'

OR 'We need to save for the children's education.'

'We need to care for those closest to us.'

OR 'We need to help those in other countries.'

Some of you may have heard of "Occam's razor",

The principle that "plurality should not be posited without necessity."ⁱ

In other words, "Keep it simple, stupid".

We all like simple plans.

Most of us prefer a singular approach.

But life isn't just a bunch of 'either/or' situations.

Life has lots of 'both'... 'and' opportunities.

We are encouraged to trust the medical system

AND be our own health advocate.

We choose to raise the kids AND pursue a career.

We order the surf AND turf at Earls.

What can be said about life can also be said about the ministry of Jesus,

And the ministry of his church.

There are lots of both'... 'and' opportunities.

Ministry is about gathering AND sending.

Ministry is about good works AND evangelism.

Ministry is about giving AND receiving.

Ministry involves acceptance AND rejection.

The last couple weeks I included an insert in your bulletin

That talked about the different circles of followers of Jesus.

It talked about the 'close' circle

where Jesus is host, and where Christians gather

for worship/teaching/fellowship.

It talked about the dotted circle

Where we Christians invite non-Christians

to mix and mingle with us.

It talked about the half-circle where we go out and serve

the world's felt needs wherever we are welcome.

This description comes from David Fitch's book *Faithful Presence*.

Fitch notes that churches tend to spend most of their time
Either in the close circle (which I call the 'holy huddle')
Or in the half circle of community engagement.
They focus either on worship or service.

But Fitch argues that in doing so
We miss out on the fullness of God's plans.

So what do we see in today's lesson?

Jesus is continuing his tour of local synagogues.
Jesus is travelling with his disciples.
Time is being spent in that close circle.

But then Jesus commissions and sends his disciples
To do mission-work in the community.
Jesus embraces the half-circle.

Ministry according to Jesus
Means both coming together
AND going out into the community.

But there are other unhelpful oppositions...
Just consider that of good works OR evangelism.

In the past there has been a tendency
For Christian ministries to focus on either saving lives
Or saving souls.

That is, providing the necessities of life
for those who are desperate
Or inviting people to give their lives to Jesus Christ.

Even today if you surveyed our congregation
About the calling of our church in our neighborhood
Some would say we need to 'share the Gospel'.
Translation: tell others the story about Jesus.

And then there would be others
Who would tell us we need to 'be the Gospel'.
Translation: engaging in actions that demonstrates God's love.

But is Christian ministry a choice between good works OR evangelism?
Once again, I invite you to consider today's lesson.

When the 12 are sent out on a mission trip
We are told that they:

"went out and preached that people should repent.
[AND that] They drove out many demons
and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them."ⁱⁱ

It is clear that Jesus' ministry is focused on people holistically,
Body, soul and spirit.
Christian ministry is about good works AND evangelism.

Well what about those remaining oppositions?
Is ministry about giving OR receiving?

Many mission trips highlight plans
For a certain group to go to a certain area
And then build something tangible
To meet a pressing need.

The youth group will be driving down to Mexico,
Where they will spend ten days building three buildings
To provide shelter for those who lost homes in an earthquake.

The missionaries are often depicted as giving.
They are the heroes with skills and resources
who have come to save the day.

Other mission trips highlight what these missionaries
May be gaining from this experience,
What they might be receiving from spending time
With other people in another land.

But consider that mission trip that is described in Mark.
When the disciples are sent out
Jesus prevents them from taking their suitcase.

They are told to pack no food and no money,
But to stay with those who welcome them.

Jesus sends them out as guests who must rely on strangers
As the story reports, they will bless others with their ministry
But in turn will be dependent on the hospitality
Of the very people they are attempting to serve.

In this way Jesus keeps his followers humble
And challenges them to recognize the gifts
of those they have come to serve.

Ministry according to Jesus involves both giving AND receiving.

So how about that last opposition.

Does Christian ministry invite acceptance OR rejection?

I don't know about you but I tend to expect God
To ensure the success of any ministry I engage in.

If we decide to serve a meal for the FOCUS club
I expect that God will bless us, and give us a positive reception.
If we engage in other community outreach
I generally expect the same response.

If we look at today's passage we see that the disciples were successful:
"They drove out many demons
and anointed many sick people with oil
and healed them."

After the return of the 72 in the Gospel of Luke
We are told that the disciples were joyfully celebrating their success:
"Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name."ⁱⁱⁱ

But it is interesting to note that the disciples' success in Mark
Is bracketed by the story Jesus' rejection in his hometown
which proceeds it

and the story of John's beheading that follows it.

Clearly not all ministry will involve success or acceptance.

Even as he sends out the disciples Jesus warns them
About the possibility of being rejected.

"if any place will not welcome you or listen to you,
leave that place and shake the dust off your feet
as a testimony against them."^{iv}

As one commentator notes,

"The command to shake the dust off our feet
against those who will not receive us or our message

is a reminder that we are responsible for our obedience in mission,
but not for the response of others or for results.^v

People may reject the ministry we offer to them.

Maybe you have experienced that.

You invite some friends to church, or to Alpha,
Or to some outreach event and are turned down, rejected.

They would rather catch up on chores

Or in the case of one of my friends, sleep in.

This is likely not an unusual experience.

The religious trends in Canada are not favorable.

A recent article in *Faith Today* entitled "Not Christian Anymore"
notes that:

As for current attendance at religious services,
11 per cent of Canadians now attend at least weekly
(all religious traditions, not just Christians)...

The biggest declines in weekly attendance
are not found among younger generations,
but in the Silent Generation and Boomers.^{vi}

Now in one sense this would suggest that there
is a great opportunity for ministry in Canada:
89% of people aren't involved in a Christian community.

Yet the same article notes that many of these people
were once involved but at some point decided
it wasn't a worthwhile investment.

They have tasted Christian community
and decided it wasn't all that good.
Will it be easy to change this conviction?
Probably not...

So what should we expect:
Success or failure?

If we look at the ministry of Jesus and his disciples,
it is clear that we should expect both acceptance AND rejection.

PAUSE

I don't know if this sermon is encouraging or discouraging.
Most of us wish that life was simpler
And that we were given a singular focus.

I'm standing here telling you that Christian ministry is complicated.
It involves coming together AND going out.
It involves good works AND evangelism.
It demands giving AND receiving.
It results in acceptance AND rejection.

I wonder if that's why God has put us in communities.
Some are skilled at leading worship.
Some are passionate about reaching out to the neighborhood.
Some can articulate their faith clearly
while others know how to really listen and care.

Christ calls us to a full and rounded ministry.
And Christ gives us the gifts to engage in one.

So next time you are enjoying your steak AND lobster at a restaurant.
The next time you are drinking coffee AND sipping water.

Consider not just the varied ministry to which we are called,
But the variety of gifts God has given us to engage in it.

Amen.

ⁱ "Occam's razor" <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Occams-razor>

ⁱⁱ Mark 6:12-13 NIV

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 10:17 NIV

^{iv} Mark 6:11 NIV

^v Lamar Williamson Jr. *Mark 121*

^{vi} Rick Hiemstra "Not Christian Anymore" *Faith Today* Jan 8, 2020 <http://www.faithtoday.ca/Magazines/2020-Jan-Feb/Not-Christian-anymore>