

Sunday, June 18, 2023
Third Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

Matthew 9.35—10.23

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/105205319284026>

(Sermon begins at about 19:25)

“Ministry Internship”

This week I had occasion to talk with a young woman who just graduated from UC Berkeley with degrees in public policy and sociology. I asked her what she planned on doing now that she is out of school. She was not particularly sure but wants to work with non-profit organizations. I commented that it sounded like her education provided a good foundation that allows for a broad range of possibilities. That, in the areas she is interested in, a university education provides some basic skills, but the real learning is through on-the-job training. When I got my bachelor’s degree from UC Irvine, my program was highly theoretical. To supplement this work, we were required to do internships to gain practical, real-world experience. Throughout history, internships, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training have been the primary means by which people have learned necessary skills to prepare them for their chosen vocations. Truly a time-tested approach to education and formation.

As we hear in today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus himself uses this approach with his own disciples. It is still early in Jesus’ public ministry. He has been traveling around the countryside, teaching, healing, and casting out demons. During this time, he has also been calling various people to be his disciples. That process is now complete, with the calling of Matthew the tax collector to be his twelfth disciple—the story we heard last week. Time for the next phase of the master plan.

Up until now, Jesus has been doing all the ministry work, with the disciples being in the background. This has been their time to observe, to see what is involved in Jesus’ mission and ministry. This was their time to learn the theoretical aspects of the job. But all that is about to change. As Jesus observes, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” There is so much work to be done, he cannot possibly do it all himself. Well, maybe he could. But there are also long-range considerations. He will not be here forever. He has his own career path. He will need to train others to take up the mantle when the time comes for his departure.

“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.” He commissions and authorizes them to do the work he has been doing by himself up until now. He then sends them out with very specific 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 . . . 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 . . . 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.”

These instructions, this job description, contains a lot of information that was certainly critical to the disciples as they embarked on their internship. But Jesus’ instructions, or at least the general ideas, continue to apply to us in our own ministry work. Specifically, Jesus conveys key points about 1) the scope of the work to be done, 2) specific tasks, 3) the support they will receive while on-the-job, and 4) maintaining perspective regarding the impact of their work. Let’s take a look at each of these areas, as applied to the disciples, and how this translates into our own ministry work even today, as a parish and as individuals.

First, Jesus addresses the scope of the work to be done. He is very explicit in where and to whom the disciples are to engage in ministry. “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Jesus starts with a very narrowly defined constituency for ministry. Basically, the disciples are only to minister to Jews. Not Gentiles, not Samaritans. Only Jews. While it is true that Jesus will slowly and systematically expand the scope of his ministry to eventually include Gentiles, to be a ministry to all people, now is not the time. And particularly not for the disciples. They are all Jews. They know Jewish religious and cultural norms, so should be able to work among their fellow Jews with relative ease. They are not yet equipped to deal with the nuances and intricacies of different cultures like the Samaritans or Gentiles. Best to hone their skills in a more familiar environment before taking on the world.

And so it is with us in our own ministries. We need to be judicious about the scope of our ministries and who we minister to. There are just too many needs in the world—homelessness, hunger, gender equality, racial justice, LGBTQ rights, voting rights, universal health care, reproductive health care, climate change, just to name some of the issues most prevalent today. Despite the myriad of worthy causes, we can’t do it all. We can be far more effective focusing on a few issues than spreading ourselves thin and trying to tackle dozens of issues. Which in turn, allows us to really work on gaining skills and expanding our expertise in those selected areas. Allowing us to, ultimately, be more effective and productive. For us, that is primarily through ministries at the intersection of food insecurity and housing insecurity: our Food Bank and Feed My Lambs.

Second and closely related to the first, Jesus addresses the specific tasks that are to be done. That he has given the disciples authority to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near, to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. There are specific things that they are qualified to do, that they have the skills and resources to do. For the well-being of those they minister to, and for their own safety and well-being, they are not to overstep their bounds and try something they do not have the skills or resources to accomplish.

And so it is with us in our own ministries. As already noted, we cannot do it all. But we can focus our energies on specific programs to which we are best suited. Let’s take the issue of homelessness as an example. As a parish, we certainly do not have the resources to eradicate homelessness. We do not have the skills or resources to build and operate a homeless shelter.

But we can contribute to organizations that are able—like the Long Beach Rescue Mission. We do not have the facilities to provide support programs for the homeless. But we can support St. Luke's, which does have the facilities and resources. Through our Feed My Lambs ministry we are able to provide meals to our homeless siblings who come to St. Luke's for their Saturday shower program. This may not solve the homeless problem, but we are contributing to easing one small aspect of it. And we are making a difference in the lives of some by providing something they desperately need—food. And even more, just by showing that we care, we are giving people hope. In so doing, we might be giving them that little boost they need to take the next step that will lead to their finally being able to get off the streets. We can't do it all on our own, but we can do our part by doing what we do well.

Third, Jesus addresses the support the disciples will receive while on-the-job. He tells them specifically to “Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff.” The disciples were being sent out to travel the countryside. Yet, they were to not to worry about how they would live and be supported in their ministry. They were to trust in God and in the generosity of those they were ministering to. To trust in the prevailing culture of hospitality that was foundational to that time and place. But I think there is a broader issue that Jesus was expressing. That they were being sent out for a particular purpose. Taking extra material possessions with them would have just been a distraction. Extra things that need to be kept track of, that need to be cared for, that would likely detract from the disciples' primary purpose. They were to do everything in their power to focus solely on what they were being called to do, and not to be distracted in the conducting of their ministry.

Of course, we live in a different time and place. We often do have to be concerned with taking necessary supplies with us or having some provision for obtaining them. But the broader issue Jesus was expressing—of striving to focus on what we are called to do and not being distracted—maintains. That we are called by God to engage in a particular ministry, and in the moment, that is to be our sole focus as we give it our all. Because the ministry we do is selflessly undertaken for the glory of God and for the care of those God calls us to minister to. God and those we minister to deserve our best efforts, our undivided attention. And in so doing, we can trust that God will provide what we need to accomplish our ministry.

And fourth, Jesus addresses maintaining perspective regarding the impact of the disciples' work. Telling them, “Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave . . . 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.” In other words, as the disciples engage in ministry, if what they offer is received, all well and good. And if it isn't, it is still all well and good. If what they offer is not accepted or received, the disciples are to simply move on to where they can be of service. The overarching idea is really that the disciples have no control over the impact of their ministry. Some will accept what they offer, some will not. That is not a reflection on the worthiness of the disciples or their ministries.

And so it is in our own ministries. Ministry is a team effort, and quite often takes time to see results. We may not always know what impact we have. All we can do is be faithful in performing the work we are called to do. The results are up to God. Sometimes we will be successful and see the fruits of our labor. Sometimes, we may just be called to plant the seed. It

may be someone else's job to bring that effort to fruition. And sometimes, despite our best efforts, what we have to offer is rejected, or has no discernable impact. In all cases, it is not about us. We are just God's instruments. It is ultimately about what God is able to accomplish, through us and through many others, in the lives of those we engage in ministry. The bottom line is not our personal success, but rather the long-term results God is able to achieve with what we—and others—do.

In our Gospel for today, Jesus invites his disciples into partnership in ministry. Giving them the opportunity to develop and strengthen their ministry skills, in preparation for the time when he will be gone and they will be called to take up his mantle. And, in our own time, we, too, take up that mantle. Being called to carry on Jesus' ministry as his Body in the world in our own time, drawing on the same lessons he provided his first disciples.

As one commentator beautifully characterizes it, "The Messiah has come, as it turns out, not to solve humanity's problems for us, but to encourage and empower us to solve them, in effect recruiting us into becoming full participants in God's work of love and redemption."¹

¹ "Tenacious Hope: SALT's Commentary for Third Sunday after Pentecost," SALT, June 12, 2023. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/6/9/tenacious-hope-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-second-week-after-pentecost>.