

Pentecost 5 - Year A
15 June 2008
Saint Anne's Episcopal Church
Lee's Summit, Missouri

Matthew 9:35-10:23

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. AMEN.

Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew, Matthew and Thomas...

Those were the names engraved on the thin silhouettes hanging from the small silver charm bracelet that I had received at church. I don't think there was a silhouette of Judas –the one who betrayed Jesus. I'm really not sure, but I highly doubt it.

But I do clearly remember those small delicate silhouettes from my childhood.

And, today, we have read their story again. The apostles – the twelve who Jesus sent out – being commissioned for their task in the world.

As we re-consider this narrative today, I'd like for us to look at the who, the what, the how, and the why of this perhaps familiar story.

First, the who of this story. Twelve apostles. Up until this point in Matthew's Gospel, we have only read about five disciples – Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Matthew. And, now it is almost as if the writer of the gospel just assumes that we know there are actually twelve apostles.

About most of these twelve men, we know very little at this point. We know that a few of them are related to each other as brothers. And, while one was to betray him, to turn Jesus in to the

Jewish and Roman authorities - that was in the future. We wouldn't know that at the time of Jesus commissioning of the twelve.

None of them appears to be particularly promising or even remotely qualified for the task that Jesus is about to give them. Nothing is said about their educational or religious credentials or their work performance in the past. Not a real impressive group, on the surface.

And, while this might look to us like a homogenous group of people – all men, all Jewish – the writer of Matthew's Gospel has given us a pretty clear hint that there was an extreme level of diversity among the group.

Matthew the tax collector. Simon the Cananaen.

Matthew a tax collector. A person who collaborated with the Roman occupiers and who made his living by collecting more money than the government required for taxes and pocketing the excess. Matthew who very likely made himself wealthy, or at least comfortable, by fleecing his fellow citizens. Matthew a lackey of Rome.

And, Simon a Cananaean, that is Simon a member of the Zealot party. A person who was a part of a revolutionary, anti-Roman imperialism movement in Israel. Simon a Jewish nationalist ready to throw off the shackles of Roman occupation with force and violence, if necessary. Simon a hater of Rome.

And, Jesus called them both - the lackey of Rome and the hater of Rome – to be his apostles. Can you imagine?

Next the what of this story.

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.

It's the work that Jesus has been doing and that Matthew has told us about in the previous five chapters of the Gospel. Jesus delivers the great Sermon on the Mount. Jesus preaches the gospel of the kingdom and teaches in the synagogues.

Jesus cleanses a leper. Jesus heals a centurion's servant. Jesus heals a number of people at Peter's house, including Peter's own mother-in-law.

Jesus heals two demoniacs in the country of the Gadarenes and casts out the demons that had possessed them, sending them into a nearby herd of pigs. Jesus heals a man who was paralyzed.

Jesus heals a woman who had suffered hemorrhages for twelve years. Jesus raises a little girl, the daughter of Jairus, from the dead.

Jesus heals two blind men, and Jesus casts out a demon from a man, who had been mute, restoring his speech.

All that in just five chapters of Matthew's Gospel. The author of the gospel surely wanted us to get the point of what Jesus was all about. Matthew even prepared us for this whirlwind of Jesus' miraculous, life-giving activity in the fourth chapter of the Gospel.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

The what of this story is that Jesus has asked these twelve people – these apostles - to join him in this work – the work of the kingdom of God.

The task given to the apostles is rooted in the activity of Jesus. It is out of Jesus' mission that the mandate for the disciples develops. They are invited to engage in a mission established and undergirded by Jesus himself.

A small, undistinguished group of people with a very big, even an overwhelming, task – to do what Jesus has been doing. How will they – the twelve do it?

They will do this immense, overwhelming task of joining in Jesus' mission because God enables them and empowers them to do it. It will be God's work alone and not theirs. The size of the task – as big as it is - is not ultimate, but the Living God is.

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers unto his harvest.

Jesus knew that we cannot make ourselves or others into laborers for the harvest; we must pray for this making. God must make laborers for the harvest.

Jesus didn't say, "The harvest is enormous; the workers are few; so move on out, go, get to work!" No, Jesus recognized that mission is *missio dei* – the mission of God and so primarily God's concern. It is God's work and only God's work to make disciples and to send laborers.

Jesus did give these apostles some practical help, though. First, he gave them his authority and set the direction for them – a divine gift.

Then, he gave them a set of guidelines for their work – not a hard fast rule book – but guidelines for what was to be a difficult, dangerous, and unpredictable task. You see the work of the kingdom is not always welcome in the world.

And, he gave them each other. Remember, the names of the twelve were given in pairs, perhaps emphasizing that their work would not be done alone. Their mission would always be supported by the entire group and always with at least one other at their side.

So, a small, undistinguished group, with a very big task, enabled and empowered by God, with practical help from their leader.

But, why? Why would Jesus take a risk on this small band of seeming nobodies to take on a task so great? Even knowing that God would help them- what was Jesus' motivation for this whole endeavor of enlisting the help of others in his mission? Well, we heard the answer to the why of this story near the beginning of today's gospel reading.

And, when he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

He had compassion for them.

Why is there mission? Quite simply, because Jesus' heart goes out to people. He hurts for suffering people, and he feels for them; people and their suffering grab Jesus and touch him deeply.

Mission is not motivated by Jesus' disgust for people because they are such wretched sinners and need changing, fixing, and a good "talking to" to get their act together.

Jesus' mission isn't motivated by any "right" or entitlement that Jesus believes he has to control people.

No, Jesus' mission is motivated by compassion – mercy and love - for hapless, harassed, helpless, hopeless people. For people who are barely making it, people who desperately need "good news."

And, the needs of the crowd are so great that Jesus must have help – initially, the help of twelve people who made themselves available and answered Jesus' call, accepted Jesus' invitation to join him, and took on his commission to be sent out. And, eventually, the help of all those laborers who God would send out into the harvest.

I think it was the compassion that the apostles shared with Jesus when they looked at the harassed, helpless crowds and the work that Jesus had given them to do, it was this compassion that kept the apostles going even when the way was difficult and dangerous, even when they faced persecution and rejection.

The who, the what, the how, and the why.

The motivation for mission is still the same today. Jesus sees the crowds and feels compassion for them. People possessed by the demon of greed and materialism, the demon of addiction, or the demon of hate. Those who suffer physical sickness and pain and those who suffer the soul pain of loneliness, isolation, grief, and hopelessness. Those harassed by poverty; those made helpless by social, political, and economic systems that grind them under. People who are barely making it. People who need the good news of the kingdom.

And, Jesus still needs help. The help of perhaps undistinguished, unimpressive people who are open to his call and willing to accept his invitation to join him in his work and to take on his commission.

People who will allow God to make them laborers for the harvest. People who will work together with others who are like them and some who are different from them. People who can share the compassion of Jesus when they look at the harassed and helpless crowds.

But, as Jesus knew, we can't make ourselves or others laborers. That is God's work. What we can do is to pray.

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

I'd like to ask you to consider making a commitment today. I'd like to ask you to make a commitment to pray each day that God would indeed send laborers into his harvest. Perhaps your prayer will be that God will send laborers to work and to give of their time, talent, and treasure in ministries in which we here at St. Anne's are already engaged. Perhaps it will be for laborers in areas of the harvest that we don't even know about right now.

Today and in the coming days may our prayer be –

Lord, you know that the harvest is great, but the laborers are few. Lord, send out laborers into the harvest.

AMEN.