

Mark 6:1-13 September 3, 2006 He Sent Them Out, Two by Two

The sermon in a sentence: Jesus sends us out in obedience to him.

Why I am preaching it: To encourage the congregation to take next steps of service in obedience to Jesus.

There is a wonderful book that came out in the nineteenth century called *The Training of the Twelve*, by A.B. Bruce. It continues to be in print after all these years, and it is still used in preparing men and women for ministry. I have a copy in my library if anybody wants to borrow it. The author looks at the Gospels from the perspective of Jesus training his disciples to carry on his ministry. His time was limited. For the kingdom of God to endure beyond his death and resurrection, he had to leave a community of followers who had learned to think and to act as he did. Even when Jesus was preaching to masses of people, or healing many, he always had an eye towards training the Twelve and those others who were following him, preparing them for ministry. Jesus has his eye on training us as well.

Our passage today looks at what we might call two short-term missions. The first one, a seeming failure, ends with the troubling statement that Jesus ... *could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith.*

The second one ends on a note of success: *They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.*

We will take a look at how Jesus used these two opposite experiences in the training of the apostles. Listen for how he sent them out and how he encouraged them, not expecting them to be perfect. See how he sent them in teams, how he gave them authority, and how he instructed them. And we will see how he does the same with us today as well.

Let's start with the disappointing visit back home to Nazareth, before he sent out the Twelve. Jesus had moved away from Nazareth and was using Capernaum as his ministry headquarters. But in this morning's passage he returned to his childhood home, where his family still lived. The people there were not impressed with him.

As far as we know, none of the Twelve was from Nazareth. Seeing Jesus' cool reception by his own relatives, his former playmates and classmates,

and his former neighbors must have been a shock for them. The disciples were at least dimly aware that they were in the presence of the Son of God. The men and women of Nazareth saw him only as one of the sons of Mary.

The disciples had seen Jesus heal miraculously, and according to the text, even the people of Nazareth could not deny his power to heal. But their lack of faith was so pervasive that Jesus could hardly do miracles among them. The verse need not mean that it was physically impossible for Jesus to do miracles, but more that it was pointless. With such a hardened group, miracles would not accomplish Jesus' purpose of forming faithful citizens of the kingdom of God. When we see people who stubbornly refuse to change their minds we sometimes say, "You can't argue with them." We don't mean that we lack the ability to argue our case. We just mean that it is a waste of time. Jesus would have been wasting his time to do miracles in Nazareth.

Jesus' response was surprisingly mild. He acknowledged that, *Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor*. He healed those few who accepted his ministry, and then he moved on to preach in other villages. I wonder if the Twelve were a little disappointed that he didn't defend himself, didn't put the townspeople in their place. But he didn't. He used this disappointing experience to warn the disciples that some would be indifferent or even hostile to their message, just as some were indifferent to his message. And he modeled for them how to respond to potentially discouraging results. Do what you can, and move on to those who are ready to respond more positively.

Then in verse seven, he began a whole new step in the training of the disciples. Up to now they had been traveling with him, listening to him, watching him. For the first time they were going to preach and they were going to exercise spiritual authority.

This step was so important in the lives of the Twelve, and continues to be crucial in the lives of all Christians. If they did not move from passive listeners and observers to obedient followers, then Jesus' mission would have no long term effect in the world. This was a crucial moment.

Now the disciples were people just like us. They must have been scared. It was one thing to watch Jesus heal and to hear Jesus preach. But it was quite another thing to do it themselves. Jesus did not force them. They could have turned back. They could have said no. But he sent them, and they obeyed.

As Jesus sent out the Twelve, so he will send us out, and we need to learn to hear his call. I think that the call of Jesus for us to serve usually has two complementary aspects. We will have an inner confirmation about it. We will also receive confirmation from others.

It might start within us. We have a particular interest in children, or our neighborhood, or in finances, or in repairing things, or in planning and executing events. We wonder if Jesus might be calling us to serve in that area. We think it over and pray about it, and we approach a few leaders or other members of the church to get their insights on the matter. Perhaps they confirm our gifts in that area and suggest a specific way we could serve.

Or it may start the other way. Someone might ask us to serve. If we are approached to serve, we remain open to the possibility that Jesus may be speaking to us through that request. In my case, unless I already know that I have a schedule conflict or something like that, I never say *No* when asked to serve. I rarely say *Yes*, either. I ask for time to consider the request. I accept the possibility that the request might be from Jesus. Then I get back to the person, maybe first for clarification, and then with a response.

Every time that I attempt some new responsibility I get scared and I feel that I can't do it. As a new member of this church I offered myself to teach the 8th-grade boys' Sunday School class. An experienced teacher has goals and objectives for each morning's lesson. Often the best goal I could come up with was to get to the end of the Sunday School hour without totally boring my students. I was not a great teacher. Nobody starts out as a great anything.

Many years later, I remember how drained I felt and how dry my mouth was after I taught my first seminary class in Venezuela. That is just part of launching out in faith. I expect that as each pair of disciples entered the first village where they were going to preach, that had feelings similar to mine. I bet their mouths were dry, too. Maybe their knees were knocking under their robes. That often happens when we follow Jesus into any new area.

But Jesus, as always, had prepared them brilliantly in four ways that appear in this passage: First, he allowed them to serve without always having great results. Second, he formed them into teams. Third, he gave them authority. And fourth, he instructed them.

Let's start with the results. It is no accident that he sent the disciples out after they had seen the unimpressive results of his ministry in Nazareth. When people did not respond to the Twelve, they would remember that their master did not always have brilliant success either. He was not too proud to allow them to see him serve in obedience and get mediocre results. They knew that he would never criticize them for the results if they followed him as they were able. It turned out that their in their first mission they did experience good success, but they were not pressured to do so.

What was true for Jesus must be true for his church today as well. Particularly when people are starting out in a ministry that is new for them, the rest of the congregation must encourage them. In any new area of ministry we need to offer encouragement to others and receive encouragement from others.

Jesus sent them out in teams of two. That is a marked pattern in New Testament ministry. In Acts you see Peter and John preaching in the Temple. We talk about Paul's missionary journeys, but when you look in Acts or in the letters it is always Paul and Barnabas, Paul and Silas, Paul and Timothy. Priscilla and Aquila ministered effectively as a married couple.

Earlier this week the Joint Ministry Council was talking about the value of team ministry. There is a lot to be said for co-moderators, co-Board chairs, or a pair of people leading a small group or a Sunday School class. The burden no longer feels overwhelming. When one gets discouraged, the other can see a more positive perspective. On many occasions I have been grateful that I am on a pastoral team rather than functioning as a solo pastor.

How else did Jesus prepare the Twelve, besides accepting their limitations and forming them into teams? He gave them authority. All Christian ministry is carried out under the authority of Jesus.

I remember once a number of years ago when I was about to preach. As I approached the church I began to panic: "What are you doing? Who do you think you are to be standing up and telling people what the Bible says?" Then I remembered that preaching was not about my ability, but about Jesus. I was responding in obedience to him, and he would take care of the results. So ministering in the authority of Jesus can encourage and strengthen us.

Here is the other side of the coin. If I am serving by the authority of Jesus, then it is not important whether my service turns out just the way I thought it should. The informal motto of the Latin America Mission is, “There are changes.” When we serve under the authority of Jesus we can be more relaxed when those changes occur, when our ministry does not accomplish what we thought it would. We are not in charge of producing certain results. That is his business.

So Jesus allows for less than perfect results. He sends us to minister in teams. He gives authority. Finally, he gives instructions. They are not one-time, but change according to the changing situation and our growing maturity. The instructions he gave to the Twelve were for their particular situation. In Luke 10 when he sent out a larger group, the instructions were a bit different. After the Last Supper, as Jesus prepared for his crucifixion, the situation had changed and he give still different instructions.

The point of the instructions in this morning’s passage is not about whether we should take sandals or money today. The point is listening for Jesus and following his leading. We will find that Jesus instructs us through his word, and through his people.

For our service to be fruitful, we need to hear Jesus’ words. We need to be involved in Bible study of some sort. A small group during the week, personal Bible study, Discipleship Hour, and our morning worship service are four ways to nourish ourselves in the Scriptures. You can find others. If we find that our service is crowding out a growing understanding of the Bible, then we need to cut back on our service for a while so we do not miss Jesus’ instructions to us.

Besides instructing us through his word, Jesus will instruct us through his people. I think we have seen that most clearly in recent months through the Rainbow Connection mission to Japan . People brought different perspectives. Differences needed to be ironed out. But over time, as best we could, we listened to Jesus and followed his instructions, and saw fruit.

Jesus trained the Twelve, he sent them out, and they saw fruit. He trains us, he sends us out, and sooner or later, we will see fruit.

Let us pray.

