

On being sent

Matthew 10:1-15

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*Matthew 10:1-15 And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity. <sup>2</sup> The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; <sup>3</sup> Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; <sup>4</sup> Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. <sup>5</sup> These twelve Jesus sent out, charging them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, <sup>6</sup> but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. <sup>7</sup> And preach as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' <sup>8</sup> Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying, give without pay. <sup>9</sup> Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, <sup>10</sup> no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff; for the laborer deserves his food. <sup>11</sup> And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay with him until you depart. <sup>12</sup> As you enter the house, salute it. <sup>13</sup> And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. <sup>14</sup> And if any one will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. <sup>15</sup> Truly, I say to you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.*

How do you think of yourself in relationship to Jesus? If you're here this morning, I assume that at the very least, you think of yourself as someone who is interested in Jesus. Do you also think of yourself as someone who is committed to Jesus? If so, how? Do you think of yourself as someone who has been called by Jesus to some task? If so, how were you called, and to what task?

In the New Testament, there are three groups of people regularly around Jesus: there are those who follow Jesus, there are the disciples, and there are the apostles. These groups often get confused in people's minds as they read the stories of Jesus, but it's important to keep them straight in order to know who's who.

The **followers** of Jesus, even those whom Jesus asks to follow him, are members of what we might describe as "the crowd". They follow Jesus for a variety of reasons, and he invites many of them to follow him for a variety of reasons. Some follow out of curiosity; some follow to trip him like (like his opponents); some follow because they want to know more.

That leads us to the second group, the **disciples** of Jesus. This is the group that Jesus calls to him in today's Gospel: *I He called his twelve disciples to him.*<sup>1</sup> When I ask my students what "disciple" means, they will often say to me "followers". And I tell them, "no: you are disciples, you are my disciples". "Disciples" are those whom I said a moment ago want to learn more. The word disciple means "student" or "learner". A disciple is a follower who won't just wander in and out of the classroom, but rather someone who will sit at the master's feet and learn. You might start out having many teachers, but after awhile you will probably find that you have one preferred teacher, one you will really listen to and learn from.

The third group are the **apostles**. If I ask my students what "apostle" means, they often will say "disciple". Again I tell them, no. The word "apostle" means "someone who is sent". If someone is being sent to do a job, or on a specific mission, that person is technically an "apostle", a "sent one". Normally, you will only send out someone who is equipped to do the job that you want him to do. If the person is naturally suited for the job, no training is necessary; if the person needs specific training, you have to teach him. *vs. 5 These twelve Jesus sent out.*

In Matthew's Gospel we have the story of the first time that Jesus called together the disciples, his students, his learners, men from among his followers who had not been naturally prepared for what he was going to ask them to do

<sup>1</sup> Scripture passages are taken from the NIV translation.

and who had been taught over the course of some time. And he said to them: **Let's see if you have learned anything.** Then he sent them out. (And so that they would know that he was going to ask them to account for what they had done, he asked Matthew to write down their names!)

What we read about in Matthew is the students' first test. And it was anything but simple: *vs. 8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.* Jesus himself had been doing this since chapter 4. His students would have not only been following him but also watching him to learn how he did what he did. Now it was their turn.

They must have looked at the exam questions as Jesus gave them to them and turned to each other and said: "us? He wants **us** to do this?? But, I'm just a fisherman, a farmer of the sea; I'm just an accountant -- OK, OK a tax collector! - - ; I'm just a nobody..." And then they were on their own and the exam began.

And **who would evaluate** what they were doing? Was it people in another land, people who might have thought: "Let's give these 12 Middle Eastern men a hearing. After all they are exotic people, come from the East. Let's see what they know. You never know what may come out of strange and distant lands."

No, they were sent to their own people. *vs. 5 and 6: Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.* Why? Because Jesus was an Israelite nationalist and racist who didn't care for the other people? No, we know from the end of the Gospel of Matthew that he tells the same "learners" to go into all the world and to peoples of every nation. No, Jesus sent them out to be evaluated by their own countrymen because he knew that their own countrymen would **not** give them the benefit of the doubt as to whether they were exotic strangers.

For their first test, Jesus sent the twelve students to people who were just like them so that there would be no doubt when people looked at James and John and Bartholomew and the others: "hey, they're just like us! They're farmers -- farmers of fish. Or, hey: they're just accountants. Or, hey: they're just ordinary workers, nobodies. But, if that's the case, where did these men, who are just like us, get this power??"

Just like the people, they were poor. And there was nothing that made them any better: *vss. 8-11 Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave.*

Nor did the 12 students have the safety of addressing the people from some exalted pulpit, giving them an authority that they didn't otherwise have. Sure, sometimes they met the people in Temples and synagogues, sometimes in public markets and schools. But the place where the apostles of Jesus, the ones who were sent out by Jesus would most often be tested as to what they knew would be in the homes of people just like them, people who, when the doors were closed and the shutters drawn, turned out to be **exactly** like them.<sup>2</sup>

True, not everyone received them well: *vss. 13-14 If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town.* That was part of the test: "how will they respond to failure and rejection?" But, Jesus assured them not to worry: *vs 15 I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.*

There was much more that Jesus had to tell his students before he sent them out on their test.

- He would warn them that their message would not only not be accepted by all their countrymen, but also that they would run into trouble with the civil authorities because, even if what they said was not "against the law", it was still clear to the civil authorities that these students of Jesus were somehow a threat, just as Jesus' words and actions were a threat
- He would tell them that what they were going to say in people's homes would cause division, with a husband telling the students to get lost and a wife saying that she wanted to hear more; with a son saying that he wanted to go with the students, as a follower, and a sister telling him he was stupid; with a son being healed of a disease and a father being so scared of what that meant that he pulled a weapon on the students of Jesus and told them to get out, now!
- And he would tell them: don't be afraid. I have sent you out on this test, and I know what I am doing.

Did they pass their test? Matthew doesn't specifically tell us, but we know from the other Gospels that they at least passed some of the tests: they had shown themselves to be students who had learned something!

<sup>2</sup> This same approach has been the hallmark of Evangelical movements of revival. See my sermon "Into any home": <http://bloomquist.ca/publications/presentations/wesley%20commemoration.HTM>

In fact, I imagine that their test wasn't just a test. I imagine that Jesus wanted them to learn as much from what they could and could not do, as they learned from watching him. Yes, it was tough to understand Jesus sometimes, but it was a lot tougher being sent out to **do** what Jesus had been doing without him being right there, physically, alongside of them to tell them what to do. So, yes, they learned a lot during their exam.

But, it was just the first exam. The next big exam was coming, when Jesus would be taken from them, and they would be **all** on their own for the rest of their lives.

My friends, as I said to you at the outset, I imagine that today there are here a number of people who would describe yourselves as followers of Jesus. You are probably interested in what Jesus has to offer you. I can tell you this morning that Jesus has a **lot** to offer you. But I'd also like to tell you that you will probably find out about what Jesus has to offer, not first of all from Jesus, but from his students, young and old. Some of them are doing their exams right now. Watch them. See what they do. You'll find out a lot about what Jesus has to offer you from them.

And I imagine that there are here today some of those very students of Jesus, people who have said: "I'm not just interested in what Jesus has to offer me. I want to sit at Jesus' feet, soak it all in, and, yes, even get tested on what I'm learning". If you are such a student, you realize just how hard it is to learn from him and how much depends on getting the answers right in the end.

Why? Because the students of Jesus realize that to be a student inevitably means that, if they stick with it, they will become apostles, people who are sent to show what they have learned. It may not be to a foreign land; in fact, it probably **won't** be to a foreign land, for the same reasons that Jesus didn't first send the 12 to a foreign land: you can best show what you have learned not to foreigners but to people who are just like you, because they are the ones who will say: "hey, you're just like me, but wait a minute: if that's the case, where did you get this power to bring life where I can't and I certainly haven't seen others able to either!?"

Which are you?

Today, because of the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, there are many people who know about Jesus and who are at least somewhat interested in Jesus. In fact, in Canada apparently 80% of the population considers themselves to be followers of God through Jesus. That does not mean, though, that there are as many students of Jesus.

Or are some of you students, who may eventually become apostles? Those who are followers only will pardon me if for a moment I address my words to Jesus' students who are here because I want to pose to them two sets of questions for them to think about. You can ask them about what I've said later!

The **first** question is this: when the disciples of Jesus were sent out by Jesus on their test into their own land, they knew what kind of land they were being sent into. They knew that death hung over the land because of infant mortality, because of most women dying in child birth, because of diseases like leprosy and demon-possession. They knew that their land was being denuded of its wealth by the powerful Empire of Rome who needed food to feed Rome and the major centres of the Empire. The smell of death was everywhere, and they were being sent into the midst of it to bring life.

Today, do you students of Jesus know the kind of land into which you will be sent for your exam? When you enter a home in Kanata or in Carp or in Arnprior, and the doors are shut and the shutters pulled, do you know what diseases afflict your countrymen and are killing their children as the students of Jesus knew in their day what was afflicting their own people and killing their children? What are the "leprosy" and "demon-possession" of today?

In spite of all the courses on Canadian society and family and history in our schools, in spite of all the media coverage of what is going on in our country, people seem to be ignoring the obvious. The first step for students of Jesus today is to take the blindfold off and look around our own land and see what is ravaging the land. In this exam, the test does not require you to look at other countries and ask what you can do for them; in this exam, you are asked: "what is Jesus sending me out to do here?"

I can tell you what two of the diseases are, as pernicious and all consuming as leprosy and demon-possession were in the Israel of Jesus' day: **self-centeredness and mediocrity**. The ill that apostles here will face when sent out is not so much opposition to the message of Christ but, on the one hand, mediocrity, and on the other, self-centeredness.

**Mediocrity** is a crippling lack of imagination that will eventually kill you. Eric Anderson, the British educator, identified the same disease in Great Britain, just before WWII: "*The most insidious influence on the young is not violence, drugs, tobacco, drink or sexual perversion, but our pursuit of the trivial and our tolerance of the third rate*".

In Canada it appears in people's long term goals, when they settle for less than the great aspirations that God's gifts have equipped them for. In Canada today there appear be only two goals: tolerance of every practice and making sure that no one touches our health care system. You might think that I exaggerate. Ask anyone what their long-term goals

are as a people for this land, and many won't have any idea how to answer, other than those two goals.

And if you think that tolerance is not a bad thing, I can tell you that it is as dangerous a disease as demon-possession, and more dangerous than cancer, which can only kill the body, not the mind. No, I have spoken to some of the brightest high-school students in Canada and I have heard them excuse even murderers and a life-style based on murder because it was the person's choice and "you know, we have to respect everyone's choices".

What have you who are students of Jesus here today learned from Jesus that, when you are sent out, will enable you to say to these, your countrymen, whose imagination of anything better is being daily eaten away: "you are being consumed by the trivial and the third-rate, and I have been sent to remove the mediocrity that cripples you and enable you to do what God wants of you"?

The other disease is **self-centeredness**, a concern for the real "trinity" in most people's lives: me, myself, and I -- including **my** family, **my** friends, **my** work, **my** goals, **my** rights. And if I should happen to have anything left over, then I will give the crumbs to those who most trouble my guilty conscience.

Is this a disease, comparable to leprosy, or demon-possession? It is, and, even if we don't see it in our land, people from other countries recognize it. Recently, one of **my** students, who comes from a little country in Africa, talked with me about the prevalence of divorce in Canada, even among those who see themselves as followers of Jesus. He was especially struck by how many cases were of divorce when a man or a woman had concluded, even having kids: "I need to grow. This marriage is holding me back. I want to be what I can't be in this marriage." He said to me: "You know, in Africa, nothing is more important in a marriage than to provide a home in which the children can grow and become adults. The mother and father don't first of all think about themselves. But, here in Canada, I get the impression that it's all about "me" and what I can be. That's why people here get married and that's why they leave marriages. I guess that's the Canadian way, thinking first about "me"." "The Canadian way".

So, my **first** question to the students of Jesus who are here today is: do you know your own land, the land into which Jesus will send you on your first exam? Do you know what you are being asked to do out there?

The **second** question, with which I close, is this: are **you** ready to go out and take the test? If you answer, yes, you may want to think again. I don't think that the 12 in Matthew's Gospel probably thought they were ready.

You might say to me: oh, they didn't have the Holy Spirit to help them; the Spirit will help me. Maybe. But, maybe Jesus wants also to remind you of what you don't yet know about yourself. Remember, part of being sent out was to learn how much they did **not** know, as well as how much they **did** know! To find out how much you still have to learn is the beginning of wisdom.

Within 30 years of Jesus' words to his students, Israel found itself engulfed in two wars that destroyed the nation and scattered the Jews to wander not for 40 years in the desert but for almost 2000 years among the nations of the world. But, the Gospel of Christ's self-giving love transformed the face of that world and the followers and students and apostles of Jesus multiplied and went forth even more abundantly.

Within 3 years of Eric Anderson's words -- "*The most insidious influence on the young is not violence, drugs, tobacco, drink or sexual perversion, but our pursuit of the trivial and our tolerance of the third rate*" -- Britain found itself engulfed in a second war that almost destroyed it but that certainly spelled the end of its imperial dreams. But even today, in the streets of Britain, the faith of Christ is coming back, stronger than ever, as followers of Jesus become students of the self-giving Lord of life and are sent through Alpha groups and mission societies into the rest of Britain and then around the world.

How long, O Canada?

Students of Jesus, may you do well on your exams.