

## **“GIFTS FOR SERVING THE WORLD”**

Luke 9:1-6; Matthew 5:13-16

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It hardly seems necessary to preach this message to you today. It is a message you know well, perhaps better than me. You know that faith is not meant for personal profit, that faith is not intended to be confined by the walls of the church or within the privacy of religion. This is a congregation that believes we are sent into the world for the benefit of the world. The gifts that God gives to the community of faith are intended to bless the world. “You are the salt of the earth... and the light of the world.” As Jesus sends the twelve into the villages, he will at the beginning of the next chapter send out seventy more. And as his time draws to a close, he sends them out to “make disciples” among the nations.

None of this is new with Jesus. God tells Abram, “...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. The law given through Moses instructs the Israelites to welcome the stranger among them. Jonah is sent to the wicked people of Nineveh so that God can exercise mercy on them. The prophets remind the people of God over and over that the earth will be blessed through them. Throughout the scriptures, we find that God’s love extends to the whole world.

So Jesus isn’t doing anything new when he sends forth the twelve. But he doesn’t send them empty handed. He sends them with power and authority, with the ability to heal, and with the command to announce the kingdom of God, to preach good news. The only restrictions are that they are to travel light and leave the places where they are not welcome.

Well, the issue of welcome seems not to have been an issue. We are told that they brought good news and cured diseases “everywhere.” Things are different today, or at least we imagine that they are. We seldom speak of faith in the workplace, among friends or in the checkout line. Religion is among the taboo subjects and confined to the private sphere. One’s faith is a personal matter. Tom Long in his book on testimony reminds us that you can talk about sex or politics at a party, but bring up religion and you’re likely not to be asked back.

Part of the problem is that we’ve developed a bad reputation from zealots who begin the good news with a prior message of condemnation, from the scandals of sexual misconduct among the clergy, or the oft-repeated crimes of past generations. The Crusades, the inquisition and forced conversions of indigenous peoples have undermined the credibility of the gospel. The church is one of many institutions that younger generations have learned to distrust. It doesn’t matter that your faith doesn’t reflect any of this negativity, you’re, as they say, up against it when you begin to bring good news to the world.

Even without this general atmosphere of unwelcome, there are specific places where the good news is not welcome: where greed leads to inequities in power and position; where violence sets one person above many; where bigotry creates a class of the privileged. There are people who profit from evil who do not welcome the interference of the good news. This was true in Jesus' day as well, even if we get no indication of it from this story. This is ultimately what leads to the crucifixion: people in power not welcoming the good news. It's not just embarrassment that encourages us to bite our tongues about faith, there is also genuine hostility.

But we are not without gifts to serve the world. We are the salt of the earth. We season the world with flavor because we have experienced the love of God. We know that the way through division begins with mercy, that forgiveness is the necessary ingredient that heals brokenness. With our saltiness, we preserve the earth in all its goodness.

We are the light of the world. We see God in the wonders of creation, in the miracle of birth and rebirth. We see the movements of liberation through which God restores freedom and dignity to the oppressed and abused. We see the love of God that sustains a person through hardship and trial. We see by faith that only love of one's neighbor will heal the divisions, and stem the thirst for power.

Salt and light sustain the community of faith, but it must break out beyond the circle of faith into the world or lose its flavor and douse the wick. We are sent out because not even the holy place of the sanctuary can contain the love of God. But we are not sent out without gifts.

Some are sent with the gift of prophecy, able to understand the times and to speak the word of truth against the pretensions of the privileged and powerful. Some are sent with the gift of knowledge, able to understand the workings of nature and preserve it from harm. Some know how to design things that improve the quality of our lives. Some are sent with the ability to heal, some to comfort others in their sorrow, and some to guide others to a better future. Whatever we are given by God can serve the world.

But there are some gifts especially useful for serving the world. I don't know how one can even be human without the gift of compassion. Even when Jesus has been overwhelmed and tried to escape the crowd, he welcomed them and healed them and when he saw that they were hungry, he felt compassion for them and fed them. Compassion, more than anything else, moves us toward ministry, and activates the gifts we have for service. Compassion takes the love we have experienced in Christ and extends it to the world.

In the sending of the seventy, the disciples carry with them the peace of God. This, too, is part of our service to the world. We experience peace through Christ, a peace that not only soothes our troubled souls, but also seeks to extend itself into the world. Peace is something that the world needs now more than ever. Wherever we make peace, we serve God in the world. Some are especially gifted in peacemaking, but it remains a

task for all believers. Paul writes to the church in Corinth that they “have been given the ministry of reconciliation... and are ambassadors for Christ.”

One of the cornerstones of the Reformation which we celebrate today is the concept of vocation: every believer is called to a certain task, is called to exercise their gifts in the work that they do in service to the world. Each of us has not just a job, but a calling from God that serves the world.

Even where the world may not welcome words, it yearns for good news. Even where we cannot preach the gospel, we can demonstrate God’s love through the gifts we bring. Just as the Spirit assigns gifts for the building up of the body of Christ, so God gives gifts for service to the world. There are places where mercy is welcome, where healing is sought, where freedom is longed for. Our stewardship extends to the whole world. To experience the love of God for oneself lies at the heart of the gospel, but it is not the limit of the good news. “God so loved the world...” Our gifts extend that love beyond ourselves and so blesses the world. For this, we have been brought together in Christ, that the world might know the love of God through us. Amen.