

A Reason for Being

Exodus 19:2-8a

Matthew 9:35-10:8

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Exodus 19:2-8a

They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.” So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. The people all answered as one: “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.” Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord.

Matthew 9:35-10:8

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

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. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following 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. You received without payment; give without payment.

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For a cold hour on Ash Wednesday in 2020, Harry Morehouse and I were in the church parking lot to bless and place ashes on the foreheads of those who came for ashes-to-go. I don’t remember just how many people came by, probably eight or nine, and each had a story, a prayer, a request, to share. It was a small and scattered amount of one or two people at a time, yet for those who did receive ashes and a blessing, it was a very meaningful experience. One woman spoke of needing this mortality reminder for herself every year since her young son died in a tragic accident. Two women had driven out from Concord since this was the only place they knew of to receive their ashes in this way. Two others stopped by on their lunch breaks, each knowing they would be too tired or busy with children to come out for the service in the evening.

Different people, different needs. Each one needing not only the physical, tangible smudge on their foreheads, and a personal blessing, but also connection and compassion.

Hearing just a few personal stories—some fairly casual and some that gripped at the heart—was a reminder of the people, the needs, beyond the church walls. It was a reminder that while church membership and attendance is not what it once was--and is actually so far from it--that does not mean that people have any less spiritual needs. There is a loss of recognizing the needs, a loss of tending to those needs, a loss of coming to Jesus for rest when burdened, through a church relationship. How often have you heard the phrase, “I’m spiritual, not religious,”?

As Beth Ann Estock and Paul Nixon say in *Weird Church: Welcome to the 21st Century*, “Most Christians today know that the church is not a building, but rather the gathered people sent by God into the world. Nonetheless, we have kept our focus upon gathering people into the building for as long as any of us can remember. An increasing majority of North Americans have little connection with or desire for faith formation, worship services, or busyness in a cottage industry of never-ending programs and activities sponsored by local churches.” What they go on to say as they describe Weird Church—weird in that new ways of faith expression are emerging that have not been done before—as people are looking for community and inclusion in ways that are different from traditional church.

I think that is a very important phrase for us to understand and to follow, almost as a blueprint, in this changed landscape.... ‘the gathered people sent by God into the world.’ We start here, gathered in person and now some in pixels, we start here in a place we call our church home, a place of worship and memory and community and history, a place that is an open and safe meeting space for people in need. We start here but we don’t stay here. From inside the church we are called to think anew what Jesus meant when he empowered and commissioned his disciples as laborers for the harvest. “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” We go out, are sent out with the compassion of Christ to do the work we have been called to do. We who received grace, mercy, lovingkindness and forgiveness—all without payment—now turn and freely offer that as well.

In a brief lull between ashes-and-blessing recipients, I looked up at the church and said to Harry, “You know, we need to find more ways to be the church outside the church.”

Well, as the old cliché goes, be careful what you wish for. Just three weeks later the world was immersed in Covid lockdown. All churches had to find a way to be the church outside the building. We had to readjust our perceptions of worship style and gathering and ministry and being the church. We had to adjust and rethink our whole reason for being. Even from our places of necessary separation from everyone, churches were called, led, to new ways of being outside of our familiar and comfortable walls.

Unable to go *anywhere*, technology allowed, invited, churches to go *everywhere*. And we have since learned that this invitation was not just for a time of illness and crisis but a new way to be the church, a new reason for being, in this new world. Now in the virtual world and the real world, we are invited and called to go out.

Jesus chose twelve disciples to be the laborers of the harvest of his compassionate, boundless and fruitful ministry. Those who were following Jesus were now sent out by him. Jesus calls us to be laborers of the harvest of his compassionate, boundless and fruitful ministry. Jesus sends out those who follow him.

Mindful that Jesus’ ministry was always on the move, and that he sent out his disciples to cast out demons and unclean spirits, cure every disease and every sickness and proclaim the good news, we too are sent out and are on the move. I like the way retired UCC minister Kathryn

Matthews says that today's church is to be about healing, teaching, and proclaiming the good news. And the church is to be about movement not static, stay-at-home, preserve-our-level-of-comfort-and-let-them-come-to-us spirituality, but a bold "going-out" into the world that God loves so passionately, sharing what God has given us with those who have not yet heard God speaking to them, or felt the touch of God's love upon their lives, or have not known how to name either one.ⁱⁱ

Sometimes we are sent across the country, or over national borders, by the wonders and the hassles of technology as worship and prayers and music are shared with those unable to join us. Sometimes our footsteps take us to stand and bear witness to the dangers of climate change, or to walk to raise funds for children who are food insecure, or to help out with our Family Promise guests. Sometimes our voices speak on behalf of those who cannot be heard from the margins where they have been pushed. Sometimes our hearts help hold the pain and burden of another. Sometimes we are called to know our neighbors better through community activities. Yet also sometimes our ears bear witness to stories of life-changing grace shared with joy and deep faith.

Indeed, "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." We are indeed the gathered people sent by Jesus out into the world, into the harvest.

Long ago, our ancient Israelite faith ancestors gave a promise to God, and we who are also in a covenant relationship with God, have made that same promise as well. "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do." Everything Jesus has called us to do we will do, everywhere Jesus sends us, we will go with the Spirit's gifts to empower us for ministry. Amen.

ⁱ Estock, Beth Ann and Paul Nixon, *Weird Church: Welcome to the 21st Century*, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 2016, p16, 17

ⁱⁱ https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon_seeds_june_18_2017/