

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania
To be delivered on June 18, 2017	On the occasion of the Second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 6A

Matthew 9:35-10:23

Sent Away by Jesus

Jesus' disciples have shown great faith. They have left their homes, their livelihoods, and their families in order to follow him. They are not unlike Abraham of the Old Testament who, when called by God to leave everything that was familiar to him and go to a land that would be revealed to him only when he arrived, followed in faith without questioning. They have done the same, following Jesus, not knowing exactly where this Lord of theirs is going to lead them. And they have gotten much out of their relationship with Jesus. They have been blessed by following him, and listening to him. They have seen him heal the sick and other miracles. They really like spending time with Jesus. Now Jesus sends them away.

As it turns out, the kingdom of God that Jesus is always talking about is not just for their exclusive enjoyment. These twelve have been chosen and called for a reason, and it is not simply so they can bask in Jesus' glory while the rest of creation is left to suffer on its own. Jesus tells them the whole point of their calling, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Spoiler alert: They are the laborers!

Jesus surely surprised them when he, "gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness." They had recognized that *he* had this authority and that is certainly why they have followed him in faith. But the idea that he would give them the same authority must have been quite intimidating. And the mission he gave them to do... "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' (and get

this!) Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” Whoa! This was a true test of faith.

We tend to be very faithful people, don't we, as long as our faith works on our terms. We love to follow Jesus. We enjoy our worship. We like to pray. It makes us feel good. And if we can have a more intense moment of faithful fervor every once and a while, well that's a pretty good bonus. Jesus wasn't content with his followers just hanging out with him. He sent them away. He sent them to multiply his efforts. He sent them to proclaim his Good News. He sent them to bring others into the fellowship of Jesus' followers. He also sent them to heal, to cleanse, to cast out demons, and to raise the dead. Do you think they believed that they could do all that?

Think of our Old Testament lesson this morning. Abraham and Sarah are the original patriarch and matriarch of the nation of Israel. You can think of Abraham as kind of the personification of faith. He believed God; took him at his word. He didn't question. From the beginning of his interactions with God Abraham was faithful. Now Sarah may be seen as the personification of doubt. [Yes, we can comment here about the patriarchal society of the ancient world and the treatment of women in the Scriptures, but let's just accept this situation and let it play out.] Here we have husband and wife who come to us hand-in-hand, one represents faith and the other doubt—two sides of the same coin, two aspects of human nature that seem to go hand-in-hand. When the three mysterious visitors say that in due season Sarah will bear a son, Abraham characteristically accepts it as true even though he is 99 years old and Sarah herself is too old to have children. God had promised Abraham in the past that he would become the father of a nation, and so Abraham expected it to happen, even against all reasonable doubt. But how did Sarah react? She laughed! How could she have a child at her age? It was ridiculous!

I think that both of those reactions are in us. We respond to God's call in our life with a hopeful faith, and yet we never quite escape lingering doubt. Both Abraham and Sarah are in us. We hear Jesus tell the disciples to do these amazing things. We even hear as he gives them the authority, the authority which is his to give, to do these things. If we put ourselves in their place, how would we react? "Raise the dead," Jesus said. Hah! "Heal the sick," he said. LOL! "Cast out demons." Here, pull my other leg!

Let's not give ourselves the excuse that it is only our modern sensibilities that prevent us from believing that we can do these divine actions under the authority that Jesus bestows on us. Folks back in those days would have been just as intimidated as us. They understood that sickness was related to sin, and therefore to cure disease would be to forgive sin. Only God can do that. They understood that abnormal behavior was caused by demons possessing or influencing people. Therefore to cast out demons was to claim authority and power over the unseen spiritual realm. They understood that death, like life, was the result of God's will. Therefore, who were they to go against God's will?

We may understand illness, abnormal behavior, and even death in different ways, but are we willing to go out into the world and tell people that God loves them and forgives their sins? Are we willing to go out and proclaim that evil has been conquered by Jesus and that everyone is invited to receive the benefit of that victory? Are we willing to tell people that God's will is for them to have life, and to have it abundantly and eternally? Are we indeed?

Jesus sent out his twelve apostles, like sheep among wolves, to do the same work they had seen him doing. They went... in faith. Will you?

Amen.