

St. Matthew's Church

NEW YORK CITY

THE MISSION OF THE TWELVE

Mark 6:7-13

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 12, 2009

The Gospel lesson for today we have the meticulous delineation of the instructions of Jesus about ministering to unbelievers. “Calling the Twelve to Him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits.” (Mark 6:7). The twelve who went began a great missionary movement in the history of the faith. They were the first ones down a road that has been worn smooth by the footsteps of millions of feet.

Jesus personally gave each pair their authority. The wisdom in this lay in the fact that having two witnesses met the legal requirement for authentic testimony (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15). Moreover, this provided mutual encouragement and prayer for ministry. John the Baptist employed the same technique and so did the Early Church. Those first disciples, called to a mission, were to be followed by a bold line of witnesses, marching through the years like a mighty army, century after century. It is made up of men, women, and children who have responded to Christ’s call and who have been willing to step out for Jesus Christ. That procession includes people of all ages and all generations; saints and martyrs. Some hobbling with difficulty, some with sore feet or bloody feet, and it is an inspiration to see this great throng!

Some of those twos may have been more dynamic than others. The first was a compatible brother combo (Peter and Andrew). The last was the unlikely pairing of Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot. Each of them was given power. *The sent one is as the man who commissioned him*” was the common belief, and here it was true. This commissioning was for a specific ministry and for a specific length of time, but the principles were and are abiding, as we shall see in the instructions given to them.

Jesus Gives Their Instructions: Mark 6:8-11 spells out their instructions for ministering to an unbelieving world: **First**, regarding provisions, “Take nothing for the journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic.”

It was rabbinic law that when a man entered the Temple courts, he must put off his staff, shoes, and money girdle. That is, all ordinary things were to be set aside. It may well be that Jesus was thinking of this, and that he meant his men to see that the humble homes they would enter were every bit as sacred as the Temple courts. However, the overlying reason was so they would be dependent upon Christ for strength. The minimum of provisions was meant to call out the maximum of faith.

Today we are more in danger of having too much baggage than too little. Through this text, Christ warns us today about having too much, as the demise of some evangelical TV empires so sadly illustrates. The Apostolic Church could say: “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” (Acts 3:6). Much of the modern Church can say neither. Dependence is necessary to meet and evangelize an unbelieving world.

Second, regarding comfort, Christ said, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town.” They were not to change lodging for self-comfort. If there was no air-conditioned doghouse or hot tub, they were to stay anyway! The English Church of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was scandalized by fat country parsons who were authorities on hunting dogs and the vintages in their cellars. True Christianity, world-changing Christianity, is not comfortable.

Getting ready for our task is not to be like the normal preparation for a trip. Jesus ordered them to take nothing for this journey except a staff. None of the usual things that one might take on a journey were allowed. Jesus said, “No bread, no bag, and no money.” Only one tunic and sandals were permitted. If we translate Jesus’ instructions into today’s terms, He might say, “For this trip you won’t need a suitcase. Don’t bother with the ice chest either; don’t even pack a sandwich. Just take your walking stick and a good pair of shoes. As for money and especially a certain credit card, this is one time you can leave home without it.”

The Lord may well be saying to us, “Don’t get bogged down with paraphernalia. The more you carry with you, the less free you are. The more things you own, the more they own you. Keep your life simple.”

Third, Jesus was specific about their disposition: “And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them.” Does this suggest a bumptious, short-fused, hostile approach to spreading the gospel? Not at all. It was customary for pious Jews who had traveled abroad to carefully shake the dust of alien lands from their feet and clothing. This act dissociated them from the pollution of these pagan lands and the judgment which was to come upon them. The same action by the apostles symbolically declared a hostile village pagan. It was a merciful prophetic act designed to make the people think deeply about their spiritual condition. We surmise that this ceremonial act made a strong impression on the countryside and brought some to grace. Today there are times when the Church must warn the world of judgment. There are even times to disassociate ourselves from sinful society.

What happened with the Twelve? “They went out and preached that people should repent.” They heralded the gospel, preaching that the Kingdom was at hand and that people must turn from their sin in preparation for it. The result was, “they drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.”

In Luke 10:17-20 the seventy whom Jesus sent out returned with joy, saying, “Even the demons submit to us!” But Jesus reminded them that their reason for rejoicing ought not be that the spirits submit to them but that their names are written in heaven. When it comes to casting out demons, most of us are inclined to step aside. We’d prefer to call an exterminating company, much as we do for insects or others household pests. But whom do we call for demons? Is there anyone we can call today? We need to keep this in mind those whom Jesus sent out were not professionals in demonology. They had not gone to medical school or studied demons. Their calling was to be faithful to the power of the Word. Their calling was to proclaim that Word, call people to repentance, and to heal the sick and cast out demons. And they did.

In short, the Twelve experienced great power in bringing the gospel to an unbelieving world. It was repentance, deliverance, and healing, just as if Christ were physically there. There was a foretaste of what the Church

would do through the centuries when it operated in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Later, at the end of His earthly ministry, on the eve of His death, Jesus spoke of this same principle in the most dramatic terms: “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even great things than these.”

Christ has given His disciples a mission. He did not ask those first disciples if they wanted to go; He expected them to go. No one else has been given the responsibility to spread the Word of God. That charge is reserved for the faithful. You and I, as contemporary disciples, are challenged to accept the task of sharing the Word of God, and the risks it entails. We don't have to worry about the results. The Holy Spirit will take care of the results. We are to trust the One who sends us out, for we are Christ's ambassadors. “Faith is not belief in the absence of evidence; but it is risk in spite of consequences.”

Christ challenges you and I to accept His task, in spite of the risk involved. Are you one of today's Twelve?