

From the Pulpit of Knox Presbyterian Church...

Rev. Susan M. Fleenor, Pastor
Homecoming Sunday
September 13, 2009

WE ARE SENT

Matthew 9:35-38; 10:1-14

The small front porch of my childhood home was framed by two Roman-like columns. Where the columns met the roof line there was a little shelf just big enough for birds to build a nest. Barn swallows with their beautiful chestnut-colored breasts would arrive every spring and soon their mud nests would be filled with little eggs. During the week as we came and went to school we would gaze up at the nests in hopes of seeing wide-open beaks bopping up and down, chirping away – a sign that the baby birds had hatched and were hungry. As these downy-feathered nestlings grew with the attention and feeding of their parents, soon it was evident that the four to five siblings were becoming much too big for their nested home. With a little encouragement, a little nudge from their feathered caregivers, they took their first tentative flight and with each passing day grew stronger and more adventurous until one day they all left home for good – free to fly into the world, to catch a wind current south for the winter and then if all went well to return to our porch the following spring.

It may not be the best metaphor, but I'm thinking that this small, simple sanctuary is a nest of sorts. As a community of faith we come to this lovely, protective place to worship God as often as each and every Lord's Day, to sing God's praises, to be fed by God's life-giving Word, to be nurtured in the faith, to draw strength from one another's love and prayers, and then we are sent from this home into the world to be the church. It was my joy to welcome each of you home by name this morning and it will be my privilege at the close of worship to push you out of the nest again, in the name of Jesus to send you into the world this week. And by God's grace I will welcome you back to the nest, this your church home, next Sunday and after we've worshiped I will push you out of the nest again and with the authority of Jesus send you into the world. This is the rhythm of our life as disciples of Jesus Christ – coming in and going out.

You may remember that on the evening of the day of resurrection, Jesus' disciples were locked behind closed doors out of fear. Then Jesus their Risen Lord came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." (John 20:21). Like those first disciples we are sent by Jesus into the world and according to our reading from Matthew's gospel we are given a mission,

to continue Jesus' ministry in the world. Our mission like Jesus' mission is threefold - to preach, to teach, and to heal. Listen again to Matthew's story: "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." Then we learn that Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them the authority to do the same and sent them into the world. We are those disciples. So let's take a closer look at our mission.

First, Jesus sends us into the world "To proclaim good news". The word in the Greek is "kerusso" and is most often translated as either to proclaim or to preach. It literally means to "shout out" and what are we shouting out? "Good News". The word in the Greek is "evangelion" from which we get the word evangelize. Now evangelism is something we mainline protestants tend to shy away from, so much so that it has almost become a four-letter word. It's time to put "good news" back in the word evangelism – the good news of God's boundless, bountiful love for all in Christ Jesus. To be about the work of evangelism is to know that the news is so good that we can't keep it bottled up inside of us, we want to shout out our joy. We have no trouble doing this when our favorite baseball team wins the game with a walk-off homerun, so why not the good news of God's grace in our lives? It's obvious we are having trouble doing this. Did you know that North America is the only continent on earth where Christianity is not growing? Even though polls indicate that most people see themselves on a spiritual journey or on a spiritual search, almost 200 million people in the U.S. have no relationship with a church community and only 17.5% of the population worship on any given Sunday and the percentage is even lower here in Sonoma County.

If God's healing, forgiving, and life-giving love for you and me is good news, we've got to tell somebody. I'm not suggesting that you stand on the street corner but think about your friends and family members, neighbors and co-workers who are in need of good news? When given the opportunity tell them the story of God's grace at work in your life. That's what it means to proclaim good news.

Jesus also sends us into the world "To teach". In the first century, teaching meant to follow a master teacher, to live with him, to come to know him and his heart, to see how he faced trials and joy, to see how he treated and related to others. The Christian Educator, John Westerhoff, once said, "the teacher IS the curriculum." Jesus was and is the curriculum. We are called to mirror his ethic in relationship with one another and when we are faithful to do so we are giving witness to Jesus, people see Jesus in and through who we are and how we act.

One of my favorite song lyrics comes from the Broadway show tune, “Children Will Listen” sung by Barbara Streisand:

Careful the things you say, Children will listen.
Careful the things you do, Children will see. And learn.
Children may not obey, But children will listen.
Children will look to you, For which way to turn, To learn what to be.
Careful before you say, Listen to me.
Children will listen.

We teach by what we say and do. Are we teaching the love of Jesus? People who know us to be disciples of Jesus Christ are looking to us, they are learning about God and God’s love through us. What are they learning? Are they learning about grace and goodness, justice and mercy, forgiveness and acceptance, joy and peace?

And finally Jesus sends us in the world “To heal”. The word heal in the Greek is “therapeuo” and is more akin to our word “therapy” than the medical concept of healing. This implies a relationship. Jesus did not heal surgically. Yes, he restored sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. Yes, he cured lepers and raised the dead to life, but what a careful reading of all the miracle stories reveals is that the real healing was about restoring people to relationship and to community. Take, for example, the woman with the flow of blood who had exhausted all of her financial resources on doctors who could not help her and most likely became alienated from her family in the process. This forced her to live for years and years on the margins of society, someone we would call a homeless person today. She was seen as unclean and could not even join her community for worship. Yes, Jesus restored her body to health but more importantly he restored her to her life, to her family, to her community.

Jim Kitchens, former pastor of Davis Community Presbyterian Church, writes in his book, *The Postmodern Parish*, (pp. 77-79) about the Davis church getting to know the homeless. The church is in the downtown area of Davis and across the street is the city’s principal park that many of the homeless call home. For years, the church quietly allowed the occasional homeless individual to sleep on the church grounds to get out the wind or the rain. Then they decided to develop a more intentional relationship with the homeless community right at their doorstep. They began providing lunches out of the church office five days a week. As the people asking for lunches become more comfortable in the space, both pastors and office staff began introducing themselves to the homeless folk and asking them to tell them a bit of their stories. For many of them, it had been a very long time since someone had treated them as real human beings rather than as bums.

Over time the homeless folks began to share more and more of their stories, so that genuine friendships developed with a number of these homeless neighbors. They began to trust the pastors and staff and church volunteers and came to them with problems they faced and the church learned about the circumstances that had led them to life on the streets. With some successes as well as stumbles along the way, the church began to think more deeply about the kind of mission that Jesus was sending them to do with and for their homeless neighbors. The church has now taken the lead in advocating for a shelter in Davis but just as importantly they are now more consistently inviting the homeless to join them for worship or to participate in the life of the congregation. By learning about their own middle-class assumption concerning the homeless and their own fears that kept them from fully accepting them as brothers and sisters in Christ, healing is happening, relationships are forming, the community is becoming more welcoming.

Jesus sends us into the world “to heal” – to bring help, health, hope and wholeness to those who marginalized in our society, to those who are the most vulnerable, to those who have no voice and no power. And that world is as close as our own streets and neighborhoods.

Friends, on this Homecoming Sunday, I give God thanks for your discipleship – for the ways you have personally fulfilled Christ’s mission in your life – proclaiming the good news, teaching, and healing. I give God praise for this community of faith and the ways we have sought to be faithful to Christ’s mission. Notice I used the past tense in those affirmations of thanks and praise. Where and to whom is Jesus sending you? Where and to whom is Jesus sending this community of faith? What might we further do together in faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ? That’s what we are hoping to discern through our Knox Conversation gatherings and that’s why it is important that you make a commitment to the next gathering on Tuesday evening, Sept. 29th.

Friends, we have been commissioned by Jesus to proclaim the good news, to teach, and to heal. Jesus wants to send us into the world. Will you go? Will we go? Or have we become just a bit too comfortable in our nest? Let’s take flight for Christ’s praise and glory. Amen.