

## God's Work

Many years ago, on a beautiful summer weekend much like this one, a group of college-age friends made a four-hour drive to a popular beach community in another state. In the group was one particular girl who was along for the ride. She was a passenger in someone else's Volkswagen Beetle. Someone else did the navigating; someone else figured out where to turn. Someone else drove across the huge bridge spanning a large body of water. Someone else negotiated the heavy traffic. This girl just rode in the car.

When the friends reached their destination, they had a great time. They soaked up the sun and talked late into the night, after a fine meal of baked clams. But this girl—the one I mentioned before—she had a burger instead of clams like the others. So the next day, when everyone else had a major digestive upset from eating those clams, she was elected to drive the Volkswagen Beetle back to the city. She had only ridden along. She had only watched the driver. But now, she had to operate the stick shift herself. She had to drive the car. She had to do everything the driver had done.

In today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, that's how it is for those first twelve disciples of Jesus. They have been along for the ride, so to speak, with an itinerant preacher and teacher, with Jesus as he

travels the byways of Galilee, doing the work of healing, proclaiming a coming kingdom. The Twelve have watched.

Have you ever had the experience of trying to learn a new skill, and the person who was showing you said, “It’s easy: just watch me.” Did you feel that watching someone else is perhaps not the easiest way to learn?

It seems to me that these Twelve, who have watched Jesus, must have been more than a little taken aback when he summons them. Earlier in this same Gospel, Jesus has called his first disciples. But now he summons them, invites them to circle around him. He commissions them as his apostles, as those being sent to Israel’s lost ones. The evangelist wants his readers to understand Jesus as God’s Messiah, who will gather the scattered sheep of Israel. Matthew’s first readers don’t miss the numerical symbolism: the twelve tribes of Israel to whom Jesus’ twelve apostles are sent.

They’re ordinary guys, ordinary people like you and I, these Twelve. They don’t possess any special education or training or skills. They’ve just been along for the ride. But all of a sudden, everything changes. Expectations are raised. All of a sudden, Jesus asks them to do that which previously only he has done. Jesus asks them to do God’s work. Do they look at him and at one another with uncertainty, panic, and fear? *Who, us? You want us to heal the sick, cleanse lepers, drive*

*out demons—even raise the dead? How can we do these things, Lord? This is work that you do.*

Jesus commissions the Twelve to do what he has done. Matthew, writing his Gospel for an early Christian community, wants his first readers and wants us to understand that Christ commissions every one of us to do what he has done: to do God's work: to proclaim the kingdom of heaven, to heal the brokenness, the sin-sickness of this world. When we hear Christ's charge, we may exchange anxious glances, as if to say, *How can we do these things? This is God's work.*

How are ordinary people like you and I to do God's work? Christ gives us marching orders, sends us out on this journey. We don't really know how to prepare. Now, recently, many of us have gone on out-of-town trips. We've packed our bags; we've put in everything we'll need along the way and at our destination.

But wait a minute. Jesus is saying something else. He's telling you to travel light. He doesn't want you to be encumbered by a lot of baggage that's going to weigh heavily on you and slow you down.

So, when Christ sends you out to do God's work, what *can* you take with you? What *will* you take with you? My sisters and brothers, this Sunday's readings suggest essentials for the journey.

When we go to do God's work, we need to begin with a foundation of prayer. According to the biblical account, Jesus regularly withdraws to a quiet place for communion with the One he calls Father. Scattered

throughout the gospel narratives, we find numerous word-portraits of Jesus at prayer. For us who follow him, striving to be more like him entails a deeper, richer prayer life. And as we prepare to do God's work, Jesus invites us to pray for something specific. We are to ask the Lord of the harvest to send more workers into the service of the kingdom. For there are but a few laborers to work a harvest of plenty.

What meaning can we draw from Jesus' metaphor of harvest fields? Could Jesus be alluding to the millions of people in this nation alone who don't know him, who have never heard of his redeeming love? Christ sends you out into this plentiful harvest. You are one of his workers! But more are needed—Christ asks you to pray for additional laborers. You're being sent to do God's work. Christ asks you to begin with prayer. In order for your efforts to bear fruit, they must be undergirded by prayer.

And because you walk by faith, faith goes with you on your journey to do God's work. Faith is the foundation of all you do. As the Apostle Paul writes to Christians at Rome, we are justified by faith; by faith we are made right with God through the atoning death of Christ Jesus who came to reconcile God and fallen human creatures. Your salvation and mine come through faith alone. And it's this same belief in Christ that enables you to "do that works that [he has done] and, in fact, to do greater works than these." Faith is the ground from which works spring.

Just as you have faith in Christ—and this may surprise you—Christ has faith in you, confidence in you. He sees in you what no one else can see. Remember, you didn't choose him. He chose you to be his disciple: an ordinary human being like those ordinary first followers. God doesn't call qualified people. God qualifies called people. God has given you a unique set of gifts to equip you for this ministry of doing God's work. No one else has this special combination of gifts. And you don't need to pack them in a suitcase, because you carry them with you wherever you go.

God who has given gifts for the road ahead will ensure that you lack nothing for the journey. Jesus instructs the Twelve not to take with them wealth or possessions or even equipment for self-defense. Disciples—including you and me—are called to trust God to provide everything needed for the work.

We set out on good authority, the best authority, the authority of Jesus. Christ sends out his followers, you and me, with authority over evil forces that possess people, over powers that enslave them. Christ gives us authority to heal the brokenness and relieve the suffering of so many in desperate need. As William Willimon attests, followers of Jesus “are to be healers, restorers, people who will bring life and hope to others.” You are sent out in Christ's authority, given in your baptism—for every baptized Christian is a minister, a servant, a representative of Christ in the world.

And we carry not with us not only the authority of Jesus, but also his compassion. Compassion means suffering; *suffering with*. When one you love suffers, you suffer with that person. Loving makes you vulnerable. In the compassion of a loving father for his child, we catch a glimpse of what God's love is like. Through his measureless love, Jesus is all compassion. His heart of love fills with compassion for the many in this world who are harassed and helpless: for lost sheep who wander aimlessly, who live without the Good Shepherd. In his earthly life, Jesus didn't only *feel* compassion—he *acted* on it. And he summons you and me to do the same, to carry compassion in our hearts and to be moved by it as we go to do the work that he has done, to multiply his ministries of love revealed through grace.

As we go out into the world to do God's work, we take the grace of Jesus Christ, "through whom," according to Paul, "we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand." We have *done* nothing and can *do* nothing to earn this grace. The grace of our Lord is freely given. It's free—but it isn't cheap. Dietrich Bonhoeffer offers these words on grace: "Cheap grace is...grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate...Costly grace... calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs us our lives. It is grace because it gives us the only true life."

You and I have accepted this free gift of grace and all that comes with it. As we received without payment, we give without payment. We

may not be asked to give our physical lives, as Bonhoeffer gave his, but Jesus summons us to give our lives away in the loving service of his kingdom.

Brothers and sisters, you and I are no longer just along for the ride. We've been summoned by Christ. We're committed. He's part of us. We're part of him. And we'll never be the same. So go. Take with you prayer and faith. Take the gifts that he has given and trust him to provide all else that is needful. Take Christ's authority given to you in your baptism. Take his compassion and his grace.

As Annie Johnson Flint observes, "Christ has no hands but our hands to do his work today."

"We are the only Bible the careless world will read;

We are the Lord's last message, given in word and deed."

Beloved, the harvest is plentiful. Go out into the harvest. Be Christ's hands of healing. Proclaim the kingdom of heaven. Tell the great good news and bring new life! Do God's work.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.