

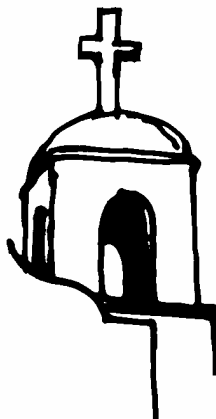
Cross Roads, Part 4: *Called to Serve*

Sermon by

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First United Methodist Church of Winter Park

On the move to make a difference through Jesus Christ.

Cross Roads, Part 4: *Called to Serve*
Matthew 9:35-10:8

It's really a very touching scene. Jesus looks at the crowds of people who are in need... he looks at the work that lies ahead of him... and he is overwhelmed by compassion:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Matthew 9:36

Then the text says that Jesus turns to his disciples, acknowledges to them that the task is huge and that he needs help. He gives the disciples the empowerment that they need to do the very same thing that he does: healing, restoration, bringing hope and salvation.

It still amazes me that the Son of God, the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, the Prince of Peace, turns to ordinary folks like the twelve disciples and to people like us to do his work. And sometimes, even after all these years, I find that very intimidating.

It's one of the most outrageous, challenging things about Jesus – that he picks ordinary people like us – like you and I – to do his world-changing work. It's my experience that a lot of folks admire Jesus, look up to him, see him as a great teacher, even see him as the Son of God. The difficulty with Jesus is ourselves. We may believe in Jesus, but we have a tough time believing that Jesus believes in us.

The fact is that here's real testimony to the lordship of Jesus, to his divinity: he is so totally confident in his mission that he chooses to enlist folks like us to do the very same work that he does himself.

It's amazing, isn't it? You can believe in Jesus, but can you believe that he believes this much in you?

I've got to tell you that there are times when I struggle with that. For example, who am I to stand up here Sunday morning after Sunday morning and share God's word with folks like

you? I mean – I know my internal stuff. I know my shortcomings. I know my brokenness. My insecurity and self-doubt work on me and I easily can find myself dumbfounded that God would see in me what God apparently does see in me to have him call me to serve in such a leadership role in his church.

I remember well the first very difficult funeral that I officiated. I was two years out of seminary and serving as an associate pastor in a large church. The funeral was for a three-year-old child. My own son was three years old at the time. I had grown very close to the little boy's mom and dad and grandparents in a relatively short period of time while sitting together in a hospital waiting room. When their son died they wanted me to preach his service.

It was twenty-five years ago and I still remember as I walked into the pulpit at Christ United Methodist Church in Ft. Lauderdale to do the sermon for that service thinking to myself, "Who do you think you are, anyway?"

And the answer came just as quickly: "You are the one called by God to be here in this place in this moment and to be in service to these hurting people by representing Jesus in proclaiming the hope of the Gospel message into their unspeakable pain."

Do you ever have those self-doubts about responding to the way in which God is calling you to serve him? Doubts about your worthiness, about your ability, about your desire and willingness to follow through, about what others might think, about something else that I'm not naming?

Do you know the *Pieta*? Michelangelo's masterpiece marble statue of Mary holding the body of the crucified Jesus in her arms? I saw it at the New York World's Fair when I was fourteen years old and remember well it's vividly dramatic presence in the room where it was displayed.

Sometime later I heard someone draw an analogy between Michelangelo's vision for that statue and God's vision for each of us. This person said that just as Michelangelo looked at a plain hunk of raw marble and saw in it the *Pieta*, so God looks at each of us and sees within us the potential that he planted within us to serve him in the name of Christ in a hurting world.

I suspect most of you here this morning can believe in Jesus, but can you believe that he believes in you so much? The fact is that we are the only ones whom the Risen Christ has. We are the only plan that God has to bring back to God all that belongs to God.

In the fourth volume of his *Church Dogmatics*, the great mid-twentieth century theologian Karl Barth wrote that because Christ is the head of the church, the church "may become a beggar, it may act like a shopkeeper, it may make itself a harlot, as has happened and still does happen, yet it is always the bride of Jesus Christ."

It's easy to see the flaws in the church. It's easy to see the flaws in its upfront leaders. My goodness gracious, it's certainly easy to see mine. And believe me, it's not so hard to see yours as well – to see the flaws, to see the disabilities, to see the brokenness of all of us contemporary disciples of Jesus who make up the church.

Our infidelities as a church are well known. They can be documented with little trouble historically. In fact, I love the way the New Testament doesn't in any way try to cover up the weakness, the stupidity, the unfaithfulness of those first twelve folks whom Jesus chose as his disciples. And those things are not hard to pick out among his followers today.

Sometimes it can be a challenge to see the church as Jesus sees it: as his trusted, Spirit-empowered, commissioned, gifted co-workers in the kingdom of God.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus says that the human need that exists all around us is like a vast field awaiting harvest. What's needed, he said, are harvesters, those who stand ready to

help Jesus do what he wants to be done. The really remarkable thing is that initially he called twelve people to do his work, and they all responded.

Well, he's still calling.

It's no accident that you're sitting here this morning. No accident at all. You see, Jesus still needs helpers. He still needs assistants. He still needs laborers to go to work in that field of need. And he continues to call. He calls in different ways, to different tasks, utilizing different skills and gifts and levels of commitment.

He calls people to preach, to teach, to visit the sick, to be in prayer, to go to foreign lands, to engage in work projects in their own community, to care for children, to share financial resources, to build relationships with teenagers or the elderly, to listen to those who are lonely, to comfort those who are afraid, to shelter the abused, to visit those who are in prison, to provide for the poor, to respond to the needs of the world in many, many different ways.

And as I look out at you this morning I see lots of good people who continue to answer his call. I see lots of good people who continue to say, "Yes, use me in your work."

Here you are in worship, waiting for your next assignment from Jesus, expecting him to empower you to do what he requires as he sends you into that field.

You've seen, as have I, signs at a hotel or at other establishments that say "Servants' Entrance." They are signs that show the employees that serve the customers what door they are to enter.

I was thinking recently that maybe it would make sense for the church to have similar signs on the inside, signs that those of us who seek to follow Christ see as we go out the doors of the church – that we'd see a sign that says "Servants' Entrance" as we leave the church to enter the world.

I want to leave with a word specifically to the fathers here this morning and to the men in general: Christ needs you to be in service. There's a national trend in the church for men to be less involved. And there are good reasons for that.

Some reason it is rooted in the fact that through the years the church often has not done a good job at helping men figure out how to use their gifts and strengths in service to Christ through the church. Some are rooted in the fact that men in today's world so often struggle with balancing work and family and outside interests and commitments. And often it can be overwhelming constantly to be figuring that out.

We have a Father's Day gift for the men who are here this morning that we're hoping might be a useful tool as you struggle with your various responsibilities and roles, and as you seek to follow the call of Christ in the particular context of your life. And we're offering the gift of one of these books as an opportunity for you to recommit to allowing Christ to be at the center of that struggle, at the center of the context that is your life.