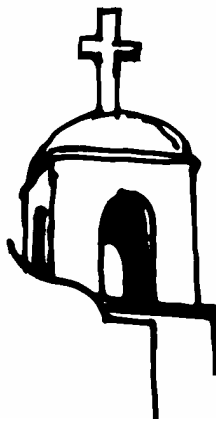


**Cross Roads, Part 6:**  
*Whose Welcome Is It  
Anyway?*

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 6: *Whose Welcome Is It Anyway?***  
**Matthew 10:40-42**

This sermon concludes a six part series where we have been looking at issues of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, primarily looking at passages in the Gospel of Matthew. These passages are the words of Jesus describing what being a disciple is all about and what it involves. The name of the series is Cross Roads, which is great imagery of what we face in walking that path of discipleship. That path doesn't always lead us on the path that we desire, a path that the world tells us to follow, or a path that is the easiest road. So we must make a choice – a choice of which path to follow. And we stand at the crossroads of those paths.

We would like to think that when we become a disciple of Christ, when we let Christ be Lord of our life, that life would get easier, everything would fall our way, and there would be no problems or stress in our lives. All the traffic lights would turn green wherever we drive, a new cashier's aisle would open up at the supermarket every time we are ready to check out, and there would never be a rain cloud in sight when we plan an outdoor barbeque. Yet following the path of discipleship doesn't always mean that life will get easier. Oh yes, we will always have the comfort, mercy, grace, and love of God to support us no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in, and this is a great gift of being a disciple, but following the path of Christ will sometimes bring conflict in our lives, challenging situations, difficult predicaments.

Why is this? If we are called to a life in Christ, why do we still face strife, conflict, stresses, and struggles in life? Well, as Dr. Bob described in the first sermon in this series, Christ offers us a vision of a world or a kingdom that runs counter to the presuppositions, values, assumptions, and priorities of the world or society we live in. The kingdom of God is an alternative world, a counter-cultural world that on many levels will clash with the society that we

live in and clash with those who are following the path that the world screams to us that we should be following. We are to see life from a different perspective than the larger culture in which we live. So we have diverging paths.

This should not be a surprise to us because Jesus forewarns us of this predicament in his teachings. And throughout the Gospels, especially in the Gospel of Matthew, we see Jesus facing opposition. Didn't he bring a message of peace and to love one another? Why is this kind, gentle, caring man who was brought here on earth to show us the love of the Father, why would anyone be opposed to him? Because he is saying to the people of his day that they should re-orient their lives to the reign of God, and not to their own self interests. The same message he has for us. And the people in his lifetime didn't like being told that anymore that we do.

Jesus called the path of discipleship a double-edge sword. It can sometimes bring conflict in our lives. Even to the point as Jesus says in Matthew 10:35 that it can set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. Last week, Dr. Bob summarized some email responses from member of this church community of their experiences where choosing to follow Jesus and the ways of God had brought on division in their families, how it has affected their careers in an adverse way financially, and strained relationships with friends. Why? Because the message of the gospel of Christ, the path of being Jesus' disciple runs counter to the ways of the larger culture and is threatening to those who have a vested or self-sustaining interest in the ways of society.

Chapter 10 of the Gospel of Matthew in a sense marks the end of the teaching of the disciples. Jesus in essence gives marching orders to those he has called his disciples, which apply to us also. One thing about Jesus is that he never sugar-coated the challenge of being a disciple. He stated up front what obstacles we will face. He told the disciples of his day that

they are to go throughout the land, spreading the message of the kingdom of God. Yet they should carry no possessions with them – no bag or extra tunic or sandals or a staff. Rely in the kindness of people who welcome them. But they will not always be welcomed. In fact many will try to hurt them, hand them over to the authorities and throw them into prison. They will be persecuted. And this is where he states that sometimes they will even clash with their closest family members. But they must love God above everything else, even their family if they stand in opposition to the kingdom.

Tough words. Not the inspiring motivational speech you would hear from a football coach at halftime. Don't think the disciples came running out of the locker room all fired up. Yet Jesus ended his marching orders with a word of hope, even optimism. Those are the words that are our Scripture reading today.

It begins with “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” In essence Jesus is saying that those who do welcome you and receive the message would know that the message is of God. They will understand that the authority behind the message is greater than the messenger himself. They know that the authority behind the message is from God.

The Hebrew people would understand the tradition of the shaliach – who was an authorized messenger. In traditional Jewish law, the concept of the shaliach was strictly observed. Any messenger sent out with his master's expressed authority was to be accepted and treated as though he were the master himself.

We find an example of one who was a shaliach in the 24<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Genesis, the story of Abraham sending out his servant Eliezer to find a wife for his son Isaac. As the Scripture says Abraham is old and well advanced in years. The one and only rightful heir of Abraham is Isaac.

Yet Isaac had not yet married. It was Abraham's fear that Isaac would marry one of the local women, from the nation of the Canaanites, instead of marrying a nice Jewish woman. He desires that Isaac marry a woman from Abraham's previous home, but fears sending Isaac there, because Isaac may not return – return to the land where Abraham is now living – the land the God had promised him and the generations that will follow him.

So Abraham sends for his servant Eliezer to be the one sent out as a messenger to the land of his brother, Nahor, to find a wife for Isaac.

**Gary:** Eliezer! Come here.

**Eliezer:** (*coming from backstage*) Yes, what is it that you want?

**Gary:** I have a task for you.

**Eliezer:** Who are you?

**Gary:** Oh! (*puts on fake beard*) I am your master Abraham.

**Eliezer:** Yes, Master whatever you ask of me will be done.

**Abraham (Gary):** I am getting on in years and my son Isaac is not married. I want you to go to my former homeland, where my brother Nahor lives and bring back a wife for him.

**Eliezer:** Not sure if that is in my job description, but I will give it a try. What if they won't listen to me?

**Abraham:** I send you out in my name. They will welcome you.

**Eliezer:** But...

**Abraham:** Go. Now. I command you.

**Eliezer:** But ...

**Abraham:** I said, "Go!"

**Eliezer:** (*turns to congregation*) You see my dilemma? Who am I to go to some faraway land to tell some strange young woman, "Do I have a deal for you? Follow me and I will take you to a place hundreds of miles away from your family so you can spend the rest of your life with a questionable young man who you have never met." What's the chance of

this actually happening? They will never listen to me. I'm just a lowly servant. Even if I can convince her, how will I persuade her mother and father and aunts and uncles to let their precious young maiden leave with me? For all they know, I could be some scoundrel, some rascal that is trying to kidnap their daughter. Plus how will I know which woman to choose? I don't know Isaac's taste in women? What a fine mess that would be if I bring back what I think is the perfect woman and Isaac takes one look at her and says, "I wanted a red-head." Talk about being set up to fail. I don't like the prospects of this at all. Why me? It's probably best I just keep walking and never come back to this place.

But you know what happened? It was as if they had been waiting for me. After spending much time in prayer, God showed me the right woman – the perfect wife for Isaac. Her name was Rebekah and she welcomed me with such hospitality. She even watered my camels. That's not your average Hebrew woman. When I told her that I had been sent by Abraham she ran to her family to tell them the news. Of course they knew of Abraham. Turns out this Rebekah, who I just happened to stumble upon, is Abraham's great-niece. The whole family came out and greeted me as if I was Abraham himself. I told them that I was just the messenger, but that didn't matter to them. They treated me like royalty. They let Rebekah go with me, sent her out with their blessing, for they saw the hand of God in all that was happening. And you know what? That Isaac... he is a quiet young man, but I could tell from the twinkle in his eye, that this Rebekah was the one for him.

Eliezer was in essence a shaliach for Abraham; someone who is legally sent by someone, in legal terms, a principal to act on their behalf. Being the legal agent, the emissary, ambassador for the principal (Abraham), legally, Eliezer is Abraham. It is as if Eliezer was Abraham himself. Eliezer was Abraham-legally.

This would be the understanding of Jesus' final charge in Matthew, chapter 10, for those who he had gathered around him to be sent out. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." The disciples were sent out as shaliachs for Jesus who was sent out by His father. In reality, they and we are sent out with the authority of God behind us and supporting us. And it is interesting that Jesus uses three descriptions on how we are sent out. He speaks of a prophet, a righteous man, and one who gives even a cup of cold water.

We often are intimidated when we are challenged to share the message of Christ to others. We have this vision of going door-to-door and sharing the gospel or standing out on a

street corner preaching the gospel. Yet there are ways that we can share the message of Christ other than these ways that in today's day and age aren't that effective anyway. The first way Jesus mentioned as being sent out is as a prophet. Being a prophet doesn't mean foretelling the future, though we have instances of prophets doing so in Scripture. A prophet is in essence someone who speaks God's word. There are those of you who are gifted in speaking, are great communicators of the ways of Godly life and the message of Jesus. This can be by teaching Scripture or providing Godly wisdom to those who need direction. Then there are the righteous persons; those whose life of Christian integrity and value speak more of the gospel of Jesus than any words can summon. They are persons whose whole life is a testimony to living a life in Christ, and having Christ be Lord of their lives. And the last way that Jesus describes as being sent out is by simply giving a cup of water. A cup of water, a simple act of service is all that is need, to one of the little ones, to the most underprivileged, the poor, the ones most in need – this too is a way to communicate the message of Christ, by showing his love through acts of service and mercy. So however we share Christ to others, either through our words, the way we live, or our acts of service, we do so knowing that we are doing so with the authority and power of Christ himself behind us.

Jesus directs his disciples and directs us to go out to a dark and troubled world, with the truth of God and the light of Christ. What the world has to offer leads to emptiness. We have seen so much of it in our day and age and throughout history. I have to laugh sometimes when I hear someone say, "Well I know what's best for me. I know what my faults are." I laugh because I have said that so many times in my life and continue to do so, and I look back on my life, especially those times when I ended up going down the wrong path and found myself face-to-face with adversity. The whole time I had myself convinced. "I know what's best for me. I

know my limits. I know when I have crossed the line between right and wrong.” I walked all those wrong paths chanting that mantra the whole time.

In the first sermon in this series, Dr. Bob emphasized the point of getting back to the basics by quoting the great coach Vince Lombardi who, at the beginning of each season, would stand on the field in front of his team, hold up a football, and say, “Gentlemen this is a football.” Well to all gathered here, this is the word of God. If we want to know what is best for us, if we want to know if we are going down the right path, if we want to know if we have crossed the path between right and wrong, if we want to know if we are living the life we were created to live, it’s all in here. The One who created us gave us this Word. This should be our yardstick of how we are measuring up, not how we think we are doing, or how society measures us up. This is our path to discipleship.

And in these words God is saying to us that the way to true life is in living in his kingdom. This is what Jesus is talking about in the Gospels, the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, re-align your lives to kingdom living. And kingdom living does not mean living by a bunch of rules, but living the life for which we were created. And to do so is not restrictive, but liberating.

For example, in our nation especially, we find ourselves in a crisis, an economic crisis. Much of it revolves around too much debt, too much borrowing, unwise lending. We are burdened down by debt. Have you read in the Bible what it says about handling your finances? What God says about handling money? Learn to be content with what you have. Don’t strive after excesses or riches. Be disciplined in striving for only what you need, not want you want. Don’t let the world tell you that a certain want is something you absolutely positively have to have because someone on TV has one and they are good-looking, with a full head of hair, and

the look happy. Have you ever heard of the adage “a borrower is a slave to the one who lends?” That’s in the book of Proverbs, chapter 22, verse 7. What if everyone surrendered their will to what God’s says about money? We wouldn’t be so burdened down. Our lives would be much freer. God’s way of life is not to burden us down with a bunch of rules. Yet by following God’s way we are liberated from the adversities and strife by following the voices of the larger culture that vie for our attention. The financial crisis we face is neither an economic problem nor a political problem. It’s a spiritual problem. That is the message of living in the kingdom of God that the world needs to hear. That we need to hear.

Imagine what our world would be like if the only thing we focused on was Jesus’ command to love your neighbor as yourself? Jesus says that, along with loving the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, that loving your neighbor as yourself sums up all the laws. What if everyone followed this one command? Just treat people like you want to be treated. What if everyone followed this one commandment, forget the rest of the whole Bible, what if we just focused on this one. What a difference it would make in this world. Imagine all the relationships that would have never been broken. Imagine all the financial or business dealings that would never have been made that have messed up our lives. Imagine all the conflicts that could have been avoided. Imagine all the stress and anxiety that would be alleviated in our families, in our community, and in our workplace if everyone followed this simple command and lived it out: treat people like you want to be treated. How liberating that would be! The rule of God is not intended to restrict but to liberate. This is what Jesus is trying to tell his disciples. And us. This is the message we need to share with others. Surrendering ourselves to the reign of God. This is a life-changing and liberating message that this dark, troubled, and empty world is hungry to hear.

**Gary:** We are all called to be God's messengers.

**David:** Yes, what is it that you want?

**Gary:** Uh, Eliezer, we've already had this conversation.

**David:** I'm not Eliezer, I'm David Killingsworth.

**Gary:** OK, well maybe you can help answer the question about how it feels that you are called to be a messenger of the Gospel.

**David:** Well Gary, I would, and do feel like Eliezer felt. I mean, who do I think that I am that I get to share the Gospel with others? To be the messenger of a life changing message and I don't even have my life together or figured out. Either I'll come across as a hypocrite, or, on the other extreme, some religious nut, and neither one is very convincing. Plus, given my track record, I would probably screw up the message away, so really, I should just leave the whole spreading of the Gospel thing to the pastors and priests, and not even try... But still there are people in my life that God has put there that need to hear what He has to say through me. They need to know the peace joy and unconditional love revealed to us through Christ. It no longer becomes about the messenger (me) but the message. And what I once thought were hindrances, such as my failures, shortcomings, or lack of faith, now become tools which God uses to administer the Gospel to others. Through my imperfection shines the perfection of grace and mercy given to us by God. Perhaps the courage to be bold can be found if we remember back to where we have been in our own walks, or where we still may be; hungry to receive the Gospel; waiting for someone in our life to speak up and guide our restless hearts towards the perfect and Holy rest that we can only find in God.

God goes before us, to prepare the hearts of those who need to hear that there is another way to live our lives, a life where God is first and foremost in our lives, a life where we give control over to God so that we can live for a higher calling, to live our lives out in his kingdom. The world truly needs to know and to experience the love and mercy of God that is fully revealed to us in a relationship with Jesus Christ. The pressure is not on us to convince others of their need for Christ. The world will be waiting to receive this message. The power is in the message. All we have to do is to extend the invitation. It is not our welcome, yet the welcome is from God.