

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

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Jesus is sending his disciples out to do the very work that he himself has been doing: heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons and while doing so they were to proclaim the good news that “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” Here, Matthew refers to these twelve disciples as apostles, which means “sent ones.” They are followers of Jesus, but now they begin taking on the same work as Jesus, going from city to city, home to home, to share the gospel and to provide healing. No longer are they simply watching Jesus go about this work, they are being sent out to do the same in the world. One might say that they are being launched. First, they were to go to the people of Israel, but later, their mission would be extended to the whole world. And so, here they are getting a taste of what would lie ahead of them as disciples: wandering for the gospel, just as Jesus wandered throughout his ministry to reach the people he loved.

Wandering has been a part of Christianity since Christ walked the earth. Paul’s travels are perhaps the most well-known having traveled all over the Mediterranean world establishing churches as he went. For a time when travel was difficult and dangerous, Paul traveled extensively through the eastern mediterranean from Judea making his way to Crete, through what is modern day Turkey, Greece and eventually as far as Rome. Here is someone who took the commission to make disciples throughout

the world seriously. But he is not the only one. Later Celtic Christians especially saw this wandering as both its own spiritual practice and as fulfilling the mission of Jesus. For the Celts, mission and evangelism were also part of pilgrimage—the seeking for the Holy in the world. And the Celts were pretty fearless in their wanderings, with some of them wandering without a destination in mind. They were called gyrovagi or vagari who were seeking God, but followed the wind rather than the roads. Author Cintra Pemberton shares the story of three Irishmen who set sail in a boat without oars. They drifted for seven days until they came ashore in British Cornwall. There they shared with the king that they had left Ireland “purely for the love of God, allowing their boat to drift in whatever direction God might lead it...” Pemberton assumes that there they established a new monastery.¹ The most famous of these wanderers was Brenden the Navigator who established a number of monasteries in his lifetime and who wandered on the sea rather than land.

Then there was the Peregrini, from the Latin word for pilgrim. These were evangelists of monks and nuns who wanted to bring others to Jesus. Often they would leave an established monastery once the community there was, perhaps, too big, and go out to establish a new one. These peregrini would do this by moving into a new community where the people weren't Christians and would set up a home there and begin to get to know the locals.

¹ Pemberton, Cintra. *Soulfaring: Celtic Pilgrimage Then and Now*. Pg. 27

And through building relationships with them, would share the gospel along the way. What grew out of this were monastic cities where a monastery would exist within a larger community made up of everyday people who had families and farms. This gentle style of evangelism was apparently incredibly effective. Pemberton states that “No other period in history has seen such widespread and successful missionary outreach.” She also notes that martyrdom for the faith in these Celtic countries was almost unheard of. In fact, in his mission to King Aethelberht and the Anglo Saxons, the Roman St. Augustine employed some of the same Celtic missionary model of moving in and getting to know the neighbors in his work of converting them.²

I often think that the Celts have a model of evangelism from which we modern Christians can learn much. In our post Christendom world, and by that I mean a world where Christianity has ceased to be the kind of default religion it has been for most of the Western world, we are more like those early Christians who were facing a world where few people knew what the Good News was. More and more it is possible for us, us who have grown up in the church, grown up within a culture that is awash in Christian assumptions, language, rites, and texts, to encounter people who really don't understand what Christianity is about, what the Good News is, who God is. I grew up in a Catholic community, this would have been unthinkable to me as a child. The cathedral was a central part of

² Robin Mackintosh. Augustine of Canterbury: Leadership, Mission, Legacy.

our community, including for me and my protestant family. But no longer. Now more and more people might only have a cursory understanding of faith: something gleaned from the headlines or pop culture which, let's be honest, isn't always showing the church's best side because we aren't always showing our best side. It is to these people, these nones (never been a church person) that I think Jesus is sending us first to. And yes, this includes to those who need healing, who need to be raised from the dead, who have been alienated from community.

But just as Jesus warns his followers, the message won't always be welcomed, and at times the work of the kingdom will be dangerous because that is what happens when the gospel collides with earthly empires: the empire fights back. And still, we are to be as innocent as doves yet wise like serpents Jesus tells us and we know that the church hasn't always been either. Especially in terms of evangelism, many of us recoil at the coercive and unhelpful tactics the church has employed just in our own lifetimes, not to mention the wars and crusades and imprisonments of the past. And so, it is here I wonder if the wandering, the vulnerability taken on by the saints, the moving in next door and inviting the new neighbors over isn't the way to evangelize: to be the healers, the friends, the advocates, to be the community we believe we are called to be. This is to say that it isn't necessarily our programming, our worship, or our music

that brings people together, but the quality of our relationships here, our passion for the Gospel, our love of God and of others.

We, like the twelve, are being sent out into a suspicious and hostile world, a broken world that needs to be loved. And in our modern context we have built buildings and invited people to come to us. It may be that we are in a season where we are again being sent. Sent out to find the lost, to welcome the lonely, to feed the hungry and heal the sick. Wherever you find yourselves beyond these walls, that is your mission field, and the harvest is ripe for the picking. Amen.