

Grow wide: Spreading our welcome

Lessons: **Matthew 10:5-8, 16-20**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2010:5-8,%2016-20>

"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your God speaking through you."

To quote another famous author — "ay, there's the rub".¹ Jesus sends his disciples to heal, to give, to care for others, and we're pretty good at finding ways to do those good works. We volunteer, and give money to charity. We vote for universal health care, and some of us are even willing to be taxed more for the common good. We tithe to our church ministries, and support external missions. We want to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons, and we're pretty good at finding ways to do those things.

But then Jesus says, "proclaim the good news of the kingdom... and do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say." And there's the rub: what to say. The sticking point for a lot of us is not knowing what to say to God's lost sheep.

How many of you were reared to believe that in polite company you don't talk about sex, politics, or religion, or, really, anything that might upset anyone else? A lot of us grew up with that message, so we have a fear of speaking about important things. Some of us go so far as to cite Scripture in support of our phobia: I have heard people defend themselves by recalling Matthew 6:6, when Jesus tells the people to go into their rooms and shut the door to pray in secret. Of course, this is a huge distortion of the Scripture, since Jesus is really telling people not to be hypocritical, not to pray for the sake of being praised by others. But it's deep, this fear of speaking what we feel.

For after all, talking about God, talking about our experience of Jesus or of salvation, or of community, or of joy, is talking about how we feel. Personally, I would rather have a tooth pulled than talk about how I feel about anything. This aversion is rooted in pride, of course. And it's also solidly planted in the fear of being vulnerable. We do not want to be vulnerable. And we do not like to fail.

Anyone afraid of being vulnerable? Anyone afraid of failing? The first disciples were afraid of failing too: you can tell they were afraid by what Jesus says to them, "do not worry about what you will say." Of course, he's just finished telling his disciples that "they will hand you to councils and flog you in their synagogues" and then he says "so don't worry about what you will say." Talk about vulnerability. Talk about fear of failing. The first disciples are likely to get arrested and flogged. They are being asked to do the impossible: to go to their family and friends and proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God.

Jesus tells them to proclaim. Share the good news. Share God's welcome with those who really need to hear it.

Jesus knows they are going to say, "You do not know what you are asking, Lord. Lord, you are sending out to people who probably won't like us, to tell them something they desperately need to hear but won't want to hear, and you haven't told us what to say!"

¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III-1.

“Do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your God speaking through you.”

To spread God’s welcome, there are four things we must do: 1) trust the Holy Spirit to give us the words; 2) notice that someone needs to hear about God’s love; 3) put ourselves in the proximity of the person who needs to hear it; and 4) open our mouths.

Jesus looks out at the crowd with the compassion we spoke of last week, and sees the desperate need for the word of hope. Jesus hears souls crying out for the good news of God’s love? When you look into the world, for whom does your heart break? Who needs to hear the good news of God’s love?

Who needs to hear you tell them your experience of being wanted, of being loved, of finding community? Who needs to hear the Spirit of your God speaking through you?

If you have your address book or your PDA with you, take it out. If you don’t, then just pick up a pencil and a piece of paper. Make a list right now of family and friends who are lost or broken, who really need to hear the Spirit of God. Just notice who you know who needs God’s healing. Whom do you know who needs to know about God’s love?

(Give them a minute.)

To spread God’s welcome, the first thing we have to do is trust the Holy Spirit to give us words. But the second thing we have to do is notice. I’m not asking you to commit to sharing right now; I’m asking you to just notice who needs to hear.

In 1845, Henry David Thoreau wrote, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country ... unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind.”² We have not changed so much since then: the deepest hunger of most human beings is for hope. Our deepest longing is for meaning and purpose behind the trivial, and beyond the daily. Our deepest longing is to experience life in God’s kin-dom.

You know that song: they’ll know we are Christians by our love. That’s poppycock. They’ll know we’re compassionate people by our love. They’ll know we’re Christians only if we tell them.

And you have to tell them: not because it’s going to do you any good at all, but because someone you know needs to hear your story. Someone you know needs to know why you follow Jesus. Someone needs to hear your experience of forgiveness. Someone needs to hear your experience of freedom. Someone needs to hear your experience of salvation. Someone needs to hear your experience of hope. Someone needs to hear your joy.

Someone you know needs to know God in Christ. And you may be the only one who can tell him.

So to spread God’s welcome, we must trust the Holy Spirit to give us words, notice that someone needs to hear those words, put ourselves in the proximity of the person, and open our mouths.

They may not be happy about it. They may verbally flog you. The demon voices inside them may try to shout you down. They may cast you away. But someone you know needs to know the kingdom of God isn’t some far off fantasy world. Someone you know needs to know that God’s kingdom is right here, right now.

² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, chapter 1-A.

When you go about your life in the world, it's hard not to come across someone who needs not only your love and your good works, but also your experience of God's love. For you know there is no joy, no safety, no hope that compares with knowing that you are held and guided by God. The only thing that fills the longing for the experience of God, is the experience of God.

Whom do you know who longs to break out of despair? Whom do you know who needs to hear that the kingdom – the reign, the power and the glory, the transforming freeing power – of God is here?

Growing wide in our faith life – spreading our welcome beyond our selves and beyond our doors makes us do impossible things. Growing wide, spreading our welcome, makes us leave our sanctuaries. Growing wide in God makes us vulnerable, and that very vulnerability makes it possible for God to speak through us. Your vulnerability makes the impossible possible for God. Because your vulnerability makes it possible for someone to hear the message.

You can learn to open your mouth, and let God's spirit speak hope, breath hope through you. At the Saturday Seminars on October 21st, we're even having a workshop called "Learning to open your mouth" – it's that important that we learn to open our mouths, and let God's spirit speak hope and joy through us.

I want to share with you a story that Coy Wylie of Cornerstone Church in Amarillo, Texas shared with his people³:

A young mother was taking a course in sociology. The class was assigned to go out and smile at three people and document their reaction.

The next day, she and her family were in a McDonald's on a cold, clear morning. She writes, "We were standing in line, waiting to be served, when all of a sudden everyone around us began to back away, and then even my husband did. I did not move an inch. An overwhelming feeling of panic welled up inside me as I turned to see why they had moved. As I turned around I smelled a horrible 'dirty body' smell, and there standing behind me were two poor, homeless men."

One of them smiled up at her, looking for acceptance. The second man fumbled with his hands, obviously mentally deficient and totally dependent on his friend. They had a handful of coins and bought only coffee because that was all they could afford. They had to buy something in order to sit down where it was warm.

Acting on impulse, she bought two extra breakfasts and took them to the table where the men sat. [She wrote] "I put the tray on the table and laid my hand on the blue-eyed gentleman's cold hand. He looked up at me, with tears in his eyes, and said, 'Thank you.' I leaned over, began to pat his hand and said, 'I did not do this for you, God is here working through me to give you hope.' "

May we notice, and open our mouths, that God may work through us to spread God's welcome, and give hope.

Amen.

³ Coy Wylie, "Stewardship ... laborers or loafers?" Contents reprinted with permission from Coy Wylie, Cornerstone Church. August 30, 1998, www.cornerstonebc.com.