

Matthew 9:35 –10:8, Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7
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Do you ever wonder
 just how much impact for good
 you can possibly have in the world?
 I do.
 I shudder every time I see
 a breaking-news notification on my phone.
 Most of the time I look away.

Do you ever wonder
 how much impact Trinity Church really has?
 We sincerely want to help our neighbors.
 We always respond eagerly
 to opportunities our
 Social ministry offers.
 But even our *big* efforts
 seem so small in light of the world's needs.
 We look around and are
 stirred with compassion.
 We want to make a lasting difference
 that will help bring change,
 and healing,
 and promote justice.
 It's overwhelming, though,
 and easy to feel powerless and helpless.

I wonder if Jesus feels
 overwhelmed too.
 So *many* people.
 Crowds of people,
 harassed and helpless,
 coming to *him*
 for hope and help.
 Sheep without a shepherd.
 Their leaders have failed them,
 don't seem to care about them.
 Maybe it's a single, corrupt leader in power
 Maybe it's a whole socio/economic system
 that favors a few
 at the expense of the many.
 Jesus sees crowds of people without
 leaders to protect them,

and they're suffering.

Everyone, including us,
 expects Messiah to step in
 and solve humanity's problems —
 to be the super-shepherd from the sky
 with other-worldly powers
 to make everything right,
 singlehandedly.
 But Jesus doesn't do that.
 What he does is turn to his disciples.
 He empowers *them*.
 He equips *them*
 with authority and ability
 to heal humanity's ills.
 He commissions them as shepherds —
 full participants
 in God's heaven-come-near.

It's the foundational mission of the church.
 Of every Christ follower.
 To be participants in God's mission
 of loving redemption —
 to heal the sick,
 restore wholeness of life,
 eliminate stigmas that isolate,
 remove demonic systems of power.
 This is what heaven-come-near looks like.
 And this is what we are called to *do*.
 We're not just to proclaim it,
 but to evoke it
 in the world around us.

Sometimes we confuse
 the mission of the church
 to be converting people
 and recruiting them.
 We focus on getting people in the pews
 and increasing our numbers
 so we have more people
 to run more programs,
 to make good Lutherans
 and perpetuate our existence.
 But Jesus doesn't say *anything*

about *any* of those things.
 He says *go out*,
 proclaim that heaven has come near,
 and *do* heaven's work,
 the loving work of a shepherd —
 without expectation
 of anything in return.
 Bring heaven near.
 This is God's work.
 And it's our hands!

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Well, if this is what our hope
 for the world
 rests on,
 it's pretty weak!
 Look at these hands.
 They're small and getting old,
 not strong,
 not powerful.
 And look at this heart.
 It's not always compassionate,
 not always faithful to the call,
 quite often burdened
 to the point of despair.

And look at the twelve named disciples:
 Simon Peter — impulse-control issues,
 and he will deny knowing Jesus
 when things get scary;
 Matthew — tax collector, a collaborator with their enemy occupiers;
 Simon the Cananaean — a zealot whose idea
 of resisting those occupiers
 is to use violence;
 Judas Iscariot, the one who will *betray* Jesus.
 And all the rest —
 uneducated,
 not noteworthy.
 All of them will run away
 when Jesus needs
 their companionship the most.
 These are the misfits
 Jesus chooses and commissions.

It shouldn't surprise us, though,
 because it seems that
 God always acts
 through wildly unlikely people
 and in impossible situations.
 It's all over the scriptures,
 Sarah and Abraham, for instance.
 Sarah *laughed*
 when the Lord reminded them
 of the promised child.
 Of course she laughed!
 They were both nearly 100 years old!
 She stopped believing in that promise
 a long time ago.
 But is anything too wonderful for the Lord?
 Doesn't God make possible
 what seems impossible?

So can God make good come
 even from *these* hands?
 For *this* heart?
 From this congregation of sincere,
 if imperfect,
 Christ-following misfits?

Our gaze gets filled
 with the enormity
 of the world's dis-ease and injustice.
 All the violence.
 War.
 We lament failed and corrupt leadership.
 And we feel so small.
 Helpless.
 Sheep without a shepherd.

But I think that's the point.
 God's missions of heaven-come-near
 begin impossibly small.
 Jesus gives the twelve a mission
 with a limited scope —
 just the lost sheep of Israel.
 Even *his* mission at that point
 has this limited scope.

It's not until chapter 15
 that an insistent, foreign woman
 compels Jesus to expand his scope
 to include everyone else.
 And it's not until chapter 28
 that he commissions the disciples to
 to go *all* the nations.

Jesus begins
 with his own *place* in the world,
 and heaven expands from there.
 We start with
 our own communities.
 Our own spheres of influence.
 We don't lose sight of
 the needs beyond our scope,
 but we can proclaim and embody
 heaven-come-near
 in *our* neighborhood.
 I doubt St. Paul had it in his mind
 to travel 10,000 miles
 proclaiming this good news.
 He just went from place to place
 participating in heaven-come-near —
 one community at a time.

It's an ever expanding circle of heaven!

Old, old Abraham and Sarah
 and single child, Isaac,
 one generation at a time,
 becomes Judaism worldwide.

Abraham and Hager
 and a single child, Ishmael,
 becomes modern-day Islam
 all over the world.

Jesus born to an unwed teenager
 and a small band of misfit disciples,
 to the lost sheep of Israel
 (including Paul),
 to all the nations,

to you and me.
And just like that,
heaven-come-near goes global,
one small sphere of influence at a time.

It's hope inspiring! It's hope against hope!
Confidence building!
It opens our ability to act —
even the most difficult circumstances,
even when we feel harassed and helpless,
like sheep without a shepherd,
We're equipped and empowered
with compassion,
to become shepherds
for someone else.

We start where we are
in a story of love that expands
beyond the boundaries and limitations
of our imaginations.
Full participants
in God's heaven-come-near.
We are the misfits Jesus chooses
and commissions.