

Representing Christ

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Matthew 10:40-42

Sometimes ministry is about the big things. And when I say ministry, I'm not just referring to what pastors, Christian educators, youth directors, music directors, and other church staff do. I'm using the word ministry in the most expansive sense possible – the call we all have as followers of Christ to serve the world in his name.

Sometimes ministry is about the big things – the things that are too hard to accomplish alone.

Things like trying to get movement on social justice issues. For example – advocating for equity in education, an issue near and dear to my heart. Our advocacy group, Great Schools for All, has been trying to move the needle on integration in a system that is highly segregated by race, class, and socioeconomics, with very real consequences in the lives of poor children. Our particular rag-tag team has been at it for four years, and progress is in fits and starts, and we actually saw a sliver of forward movement this week. It's still a very long haul.

Most social justice issues are being fought for over decades, even centuries or more – some with little movement, some with none. You know the list: Civil rights, mass incarceration, economic equality, health care, immigration, social safety nets, war and militarism, LGBTQ rights and marriage equality, women's rights, the list goes on – these ministries of justice, led by ancient and present-day prophetic voices, are all massive endeavors that span multiple lifetimes. In our communities, we don't always agree on the scope or validity of the justice issue, let alone on just and right remedies for them.

They are God-sized problems, and require God-sized solutions. And they remind me of the saying that is often the only one that can keep us from being overwhelmed with the enormity of discipleship, and that is that “we have only one Messiah, only one Savior, and it isn't us.”

Maybe those are the kinds of things Jesus had in mind in the verses that come immediately before today's Gospel

reading, and they set the stage for what we hear today. They're part of a larger address Jesus gives his disciples on what it is to follow him – Matthew's so-called "Missionary Discourse."

And in this discourse, what we hear Jesus tell his disciples is that following him will disrupt their lives. Here's my loose paraphrase of this disruption: When you go out proclaiming the good news, curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the unclean ones, casting out demons, don't take anything extra with you – don't take extra money, don't take an extra bag full of stuff, don't take extra clothes, don't take anything just in case. Some will welcome you, and some won't. You may be persecuted; you may even be hated because of me. And don't think that I have come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword...whoever loves their family more than me isn't worthy of me ...those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

To say that disrupts neatly planned lives understates the situation. Stanley Saunders notes "the disciples are completely dependent, first on God and then on the hospitality of the communities that receive them. Their vulnerability and dependence is the key to the success of the mission."

And that's where last week's Gospel text left off – at this place of "what in the world did God get us into?" Yet it's not where Jesus' address to his disciples ends. So today, as the iconic Paul Harvey used to say, here is "the rest of the story."

There are several important parts to the rest of the story. One part is that ministry is not always and only about the big and intractable, the divisive and disruptive. Sometimes it's also about the ministry of little things. Like giving someone a cup of cold water. Third Church youth lived out this scripture when they offered bottles of water to thirsty riders in the Tour de Cure a couple of weeks ago.

These so-called little acts of ministry can be huge. Something as simple as adding cookies to lemonade hour after church in the summertime. A couple of folks on the Membership & Evangelism committee decided would be a good thing to do, and took it upon themselves to just make it happen. I know it matters, because when I was in seminary, and would do various guest preaching gigs at different churches, my son would form his impression of a church based on the quality of its coffee hour!

Impressions aside, those small gestures matter. The ministry of calling someone by name. The ministry of

delivering flowers after church to someone in the hospital. The ministry of sending a card (or text or email) with an encouraging message.

It all makes a difference - The contribution to help furnish RAIHN's new day center for homeless families. Blowing up inflatable mattresses for them to sleep on when we host a rotation. Washing all the dish towels every week after Dining Room Ministry. Saying a prayer with a Food Cupboard guest. Contributing supplies for a children's outreach program. Tutoring a child in school and giving them 30 minutes of undivided personal attention every week. Planting a monarch butterfly garden to help care for God's beautiful creation. Preparing the elements for communion.

All of these small acts of ministry matter. And maybe more than anything else – what matters is the ministry of just showing up during someone's time of need – at a memorial service or visitation, or time of discouragement – I can tell you, just showing up, a hand on the shoulder without even one word said; just showing up is huge.

“The life of faith is composed of a thousand small gestures,” writes David Lose. And we all know those gestures sometimes require some sacrifice, even if they are small. One scholar noted that in Jesus' day, “to offer cold water required drawing water from a deep well, and often carrying it uphill in a heavy jar to the family home.” Yes, sacrifice.

And it doesn't go unnoticed. Jill Duffield reminds us that “none of that goes unnoticed by the Triune God who is present every time we welcome a prophet or a righteous person or a little one or the least of these.” None of that goes unnoticed by the one who sends us. None of that goes unnoticed by the one we represent.

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Liddy Barlow tells of the experience of students in clinical pastoral education – and what she wrote resonated with my training. For decades, she says, these “students have heard the same words before their first day out on the wards...when you enter a hospital room as a chaplain, you are no longer yourself alone. You are representing Christ. Alongside you, behind you, following you into the room, invisibly but truly, is the entire church. You bring God with you. You are yourself, but you stand for more than yourself.”

This is in essence what Jesus tells his disciples, and by

extension, tells all of us. Barlow goes on: "As [Jesus'] representatives, [his disciples] now carry an identity beyond their own. When they travel, preach, teach, and heal, it is Christ whose work will be done by their hands. The world will meet Jesus through them."

There's been a lot of chatter in op-eds around the country this week as to what words and behavior are befitting a holder of public office, noting that those words and behavior represent not only the individual, but also the office they hold and the people they represent.

In the same way, Christ's disciples carry his identity. And it's even more than that.

Stanley Saunders puts it this way, "The disciples represent the full presence and power of Jesus, just as Jesus bears the full presence and power of God... More than any other Gospel, Matthew underlines the ways in which Jesus not only represents divine power and presence, but *democratizes* this power -- and the responsibilities that come with it -- in ministry with his disciples."

What a gift to be Christ's ambassadors. We carry Christ's identity, we carry Christ's power, we carry Christ's presence in every act of discipleship. What an awesome responsibility. And what an awesome privilege. We get to be involved in what God is doing in the world. Let us welcome this gift, knowing we have already been equipped with everything we need, for we have been given Christ himself at the Table of Grace. Amen.