

I love this season after Pentecost – the green season – and in our part of the world the growing season. In this season we focus on growing in the spirit that we have received through the miracle of Pentecost. We are in year A of our three-year cycle – a year that draws heavily from the gospel of Matthew. While the gospel of John is the one used most extensively for drawing new converts to Christ – the book of Matthew is for “growing” people up – for discipling.

Matthew was one of those called by Jesus to “follow him”. When Jesus called Matthew out he didn’t call him just into a one on one relationship – he called him into a community. This must have been extremely profound and challenging for Matthew for he had abandoned the community he was born into by collecting taxes for the Roman government. When Jesus called him he was operating as a “loner”, intent on getting his own needs met at the expense of his fellow Jews.

Matthew was called from a place where his main concern had been for himself into a journey where his “self” interest was to be abandoned for those things that are of interest to God. God

is interested in relationships and he is interested in developing his followers into a people for whom relationship with God and relationship with others is primary.

Just as this must have been challenging for Matthew, it is also challenging for us westerners. We are a people where it is all about “me”. “My” wants, “my” needs, even “my” Jesus. We are so self absorbed that even our devotion is all about “me”. I pray, I study, to get “my” needs met. Those of us who are evangelicals speak mostly about “my” personal relationship with Jesus. Our songs of praise focus on the “I”. I come to “my” church to get “my” needs met. I come to the altar for communion and don’t you dare do anything to interrupt my “personal” devotion time with Jesus. We most often leave a church with the complaint to our pastor that we are not “being fed”. Your pastor can tell you that what we always want to say in response to that is --- “who are you feeding?” I think the pastor, the music director, the dietary manager, the priest’s assistant were all placed on earth to meet my every need and do it in a style that suits me perfectly.

Jesus is a part of a “we”. God is community – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is the most challenging part about becoming a disciple of Jesus – abandoning the “me” mindset for the “we” mindset.

Jesus accomplishes this transformation in his followers through several different teaching styles. Early into the “3 year” study plan, Jesus begins by presenting to his followers an extensive classroom session – let me rephrase that “hillside” session -- that we know as the Sermon on the Mount. In this teaching he lays out a picture of what things are like in God’s kingdom. He presents the kingdom not as some reality in the future – but as a parallel reality – which butts up against this world and as it touches earth transforms it. He describes those who are touched – “blessed” --- set a part for the kingdom in ways that are totally upside down and backwards from the way things are in world --- a place where those who hunger and thirst are filled and those who grieve are comforted – where the meek and the poor in spirit are valued above the brazen and the assertive. He lays down kingdom values for relationships. He talks about murder being more than taking a life – he compares it to being angry with another. He

says that to commit adultery does not take a physical act – only the thoughts of it. He speaks of divorce, the taking of oaths – he sets out an expectation of perfection – as the Father is perfect. He instructs in how to give and who to give to – the needy --- quietly and secretly -- no plaques on the pews or the organs! He gives a model for prayer – and in chapter 6 paints a picture of a kingdom where worry cannot be tolerated --- he describes those who worry as pagans and those of the kingdom as those who seek his kingdom and his righteousness and as a result receive everything that they need. He instructs that the kingdom is a place where we live each day fully with no concern for the next. He warns against judging others – he tells how to get what you need --- ask and it will be given to you – seek and you will find. He warns that there will be false prophets – who sound good and look good but will lead down a path to disaster. Wow --- it is a wonder that the crowds who were following him didn't all run away! ... and it is a wonder we are not running away also – but this is a teaching for those who are already in relationship and are now being built up for kingdom work. That is who we are. The picture Jesus paints of the kingdom is one that none of us could possibly aspire to --- there

is no way to read those first seven chapters of Matthew without squirming – who can live up to all of that. No one --- and Jesus was very aware of that and so upon completing the hillside session he moves into another method of training. Jesus begins to “show” them how the Christ has come into the world to heal the brokenness that his teaching has exposed. He begins to go out – with his followers --- and enter into the brokenness of people’s lives and to bring healing and restoration. This is the hands on part of the training. Jesus loved the broken. He did not come to save the righteous but to save sinners. He did not come to heal those who were well, but to heal the sick.

Jesus showed no mercy in the lives of the religious leaders of his time --- they didn’t need him --- they were righteous on their own – so his attitude toward them was that they could make their own way into heaven – as for Him he would concentrate on those who needed a savior. Jesus’ healing ministry then and today through us, is always about restoring those things that keep people out of community.

Most of you know that I serve at Grace Mission with my husband Michael. Our congregation is

made up predominantly of those on the streets and in the projects. They are poor, they are sick, they are addicted. We have been doing ministry in that place now for 12 years. I taunt my fellow pastors regularly telling them – “We have the best congregation in the city – the easiest to minister to – because they know they need a Savior” --- they may not yet know who he is – but their need is all over them. It is not hidden. They are open and transparent – not afraid to let you into the places in their lives where they need help. Not reluctant to ask for food, a shower, clean underwear. Anxious for a prayer -- Open with their struggles with addiction and relationships. Unable to deny their poverty. Often their physical disease is outwardly apparent. Just the kind of folks that Jesus loved to hang with and loved to bring healing to.

We do altar ministry at Grace Mission every Sunday in the form of unction. We lay hands on big, tall, ugly, mean men – on street prostitutes – on the woman with head lice creeping down onto her forehead, little children who have rarely known the touch of a loving mother and father, and on the professional from a suburban church who has come to serve and finds himself laid open and vulnerable in the presence of the least

of these. As each of them receives the simple ministry of touch --- something that many of them have never experienced, even as children, except in the context of violence or sex, they melt and they weep. Jesus is not afraid to touch those who the world considers untouchable. He touches them through the ministry at Grace Mission for the purpose of restoring community. The folks that hang out at Grace Mission, for the most part, are a people with little experience of healthy community.

Most of us in this room probably consider ourselves to be a lot different from those at Grace Mission. After all we are a fairly moral folk --- we are physically clean -- we came from good Episcopal – Baptist --- Methodist stock – we don't "do" any major sins – right? Our communities are healthy ones – right ????

Most of us have never smoked crack cocaine or fed our children through the rewards of street prostitution. But if we will dare to compare our actions and the results of our actions (or more profoundly our inactions and the results of those) to the kingdom values, we will be able to see our deficiencies and then we too can become a people that Jesus wants to hang with – and that Jesus wants to restore. Jesus loves

us --- not in our perfection --- but in our brokenness – the doorway for Jesus to enter into our lives is through the cracks of our imperfections. If it ain't broke it can't be fixed – if we are not sinners then we can't be redeemed. Brothers and sisters – the gospel challenges us to become like those at Grace Mission --- openly acknowledging our need and our need for the One who can heal us and restore us and set us up as citizens of the kingdom of Heaven -- the One who can deliver us from our self-interest.

Today we are exposed to another of Jesus' teaching styles. As Jesus walks with his disciples constantly going from place to place seeking out ways to bring healing to brokenness, searching out those who are in isolation so that they can be brought into community, he uses those things that he sees around him to bring pearls of wisdom and truth to those who are following him. In our gospel lesson we share in one of those impromptu teaching sessions. As they are walking along they most likely see someone in the fields sowing seed.

Now we have all heard this parable many times – we have heard it preached on, we have

considered it in our bible studies. We know that the seed is “truth” the word of God. We know that the different kinds of ground represent the challenges that we face in “hearing” and responding to the word. We have individually been challenged by it to take a look at our lives and the things that might interfere with our responding to God’s truth. Just like much of what we study, hear preached and consider – we have considered it as it applies to our individual lives and walk with our Lord. If I were preaching from this text at Grace Mission today I would be using it to challenge us as a community. I would direct us to look at the field not as a representation only of our own lives but as a representation of our community life. We are the body of Christ with many members. How well we function, how much fruit we produce is an outcome of the health of our community. We might very well have individuals in our body that are in pretty good shape but as long as one part of the body is in need of healing the body as a whole can not function as it should. I would not have us focus on the problems in the field – the hard and the rocky places – but I would direct us to consider what it is that makes the good soil good. How are the rocks removed – how does that shallow earth

become rich, who removes the weeds? I would suggest to them and I will suggest to us here today – that it is the fellow members of the body. Traditionally we would say it is God through the power of the Holy Spirit – and that is correct. But how is it that Jesus arranged for his spirit to operate in the world? Was it not through his “body”? Did not the spirit come and rest in and on a community of believers? Are we not called to minister to each other for the purpose of maintaining a healthy strong body which can make major differences in the world around us?

Paul was another example of a man who was transformed from self interest into one who had the heart of God. His travels took him into communities that were transformed by the spirit’s ministry through him and his team. In his letter to the Romans he describes the “hell” of living with trying to work out his own stuff. The ups and downs, the craziness of it all. He shares the “answer” to the problem. He says, “Thank god that in Christ I am no longer condemned to this way of life” – okay, not exactly as it reads – but this is the essence of what he says. Because of Christ I am set free from self interest (the root of all sin) and delivered into a way of life where I know that

God has my back and I can focus on the bigger picture – co-operating with Him, tending the fields, building a community of believers who produce huge harvests for the kingdom.

At Grace Mission we greatly appreciate the individual gifts of time and money given, but those gifts that bless our hearts the most are the corporate expressions of the Church. This congregation is a perfect example of how that works. You give to the work of restoring those members of the body at Grace Mission in an intentional corporate way. Your vacation bible school kids collect socks, your families serve meals, you send a check each month from your corporate budget as well as your personal budgets. You are tending the field, not as one set of hands – but as the body of Christ. That must warm the heart of the God. It sure warms our hearts.

If you have been in church the last few Sundays you have been challenged by the same lessons that Jesus gave his disciples over 2,000 years ago – The kingdom of heaven is near – heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Don't rely on your "own

stuff” to carry this out – go out taking nothing of your own – leaving your resources behind --- and let the Father take care of you through his people. Don’t sweat it when you are rejected – just keep on going – people will accuse you of being Satan – so what – they accused Jesus of the same thing. Because of Jesus’ teaching you will begin to see that those things you thought were “right” are in fact very broken – the way you have judged in the past by outward appearance – you will now judge by kingdom values. You will be refocused from self-interest into an interest in the body as a whole.

Don’t be afraid to do the work of the Father --- don’t be overwhelmed by it --- start small and as you do gain courage. Matthew tells us in Chapter 25 – that as often as we do the ministry of touch (feed the hungry, he says, give drink to the thirsty, invite the lonely in, clothe those who need it, visit the sick and the prisoner I tell you the truth, whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you do to me).

You are in a wonderful place here at St. John’s for God’s grace and mercy to be realized in your lives and in your ministries – you are in active recovering from some broken places. Those

things that have been lost have left a space. You prayed a prayer each week for quite some time, inviting the Holy Spirit to come into that place and prepare you and prepare the person who would come to facilitate the continued ministry through this place. God has answered those prayers. You have a new rector. Be bold – dare to be open to your rector as he leads you. Retrain yourselves to not think of him as “my” pastor but as “our” pastor. Allow him to place the needs of the community as a whole above your personal needs. Explore with him the ways as a body that you can work the fields so that they will continue to be healthy and productive -- providing food, work and healing for many. Don't resist. Don't insist on things being done a certain way, “because we have always done it that way at St. John's”. The church exists for those outside of it --- come here as a community presenting your brokenness at the altar and receive healing and empowerment and then go out there as a strong body and freely give what you have so freely received.

Amen