

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
July 2, 2023

## **Sharing the Presence of Christ**

Matthew 10:40-42

I once visited a man who was in the hospital, transitioning to a hospice stage of care. His wife sat faithfully by his bed, talking to him, listening to him as he struggled to form his words. When I first arrived, I had greeted him and reminded him of who I was, but I could tell that he was struggling to identify me. A few minutes into my visit, as his wife tried to encourage him and stimulate his interaction with me, she pointed to me and asked him, "Do you know who this is?" For an extended moment, he leaned slightly forward and stared at me, eyes straining to focus, mind struggling to comprehend, and finally said, "Jesus."

I immediately started disqualifying myself from savior status. "No, I'm not Jesus. I wouldn't begin to claim that kind of power and authority," I said, with a slight grin. "But I do represent Jesus." I thought that in that moment, that might be the best way to put it. I'm not the Lord, but I am a disciple of the Lord, and thus a messenger.

"He who receives you receives me," says Jesus. "And he who receives me receives the one who sent me" (v. 40). This is the opening declaration in the closing section of what's often called Jesus' "missionary discourse." At the beginning of this chapter, Jesus sends out the Twelve. Matthew says Jesus "gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness" (v. 1). So the Twelve are authorized to do what Jesus has been doing. They're also instructed to preach what Jesus has been preaching: "The kingdom of heaven is near" (v. 7). In their words and their deeds, the Twelve aren't just imitating Jesus. They're actually participating in his mission. They're sent to extend and manifest the reality of God's reign.

By the time we reach the end of Matthew 10, the perspective has shifted from the commissioning of the Twelve to the sending of disciples in a broader sense. All who have devoted themselves to following Jesus are included in his mission. This commissioned community of disciples includes a range of people in different contexts and circumstances. Some are more itinerant. They travel from place to place, carrying the good news of the kingdom into a variety of locations. Other disciples are more settled. They often focus on receiving and supporting the itinerant members of the fellowship. The good news, says Jesus, is that whether you travel for the sake of the gospel or stay put, God doesn't distribute rewards on a graded scale, but with generosity and grace toward all. In other words, being "sent" takes a variety of forms.

This morning's service is another manifestation of the fact that we serve a gathering and sending God. In congregational worship, we're gathered by God to offer him our praise and to hear and receive his word. At the same time, we're sent by God into the world to proclaim and practice the gospel, to share the presence of Christ with others. As one resource has put it, "Nor are gathering and sending separate and distinct from one another; together they express the continual movement of the Spirit in worship. As God gathers and sends us, our worship takes form and shape. It becomes a journeying into God and a journeying with God into the world."<sup>1</sup>

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ isn't a God who stays put, content to rest in eternal contemplation of his love and power. No, God is a missionary God. Engaging with the world is an essential part of God's character and nature. God's mission brings God into the realm of this earthly life for our salvation. Jesus is sent by God. The disciples are sent by Jesus. This means that mission isn't primarily a program or project that we the church carry out. More than anything, mission is an expression of the eternal character of God. It's who God is and what God does, which determines who we are and what we do. So being here today, in the presence of a sending God, makes us a sent people.

I like the way that one preacher has put it when he says: "Few things are more sad than an unsent life. What a joy, in good times, but especially in bad, to believe that you are where you are because you have been put there; you are doing what you are doing because God means for this to be so. Every follower of Jesus Christ, clergy or not, is sent."<sup>2</sup> Sent not to be Jesus. Only Jesus can be Jesus. But who Jesus is, and what Jesus is doing, require representatives, and that's where you and I come in.

Being sent means that we're authorized by our sender, the risen Lord. Now we need to hear and receive that commission with all gratitude and humility. It doesn't put us in a higher spot in a hierarchy of authority, from which we can look down on others in the world. It doesn't justify arrogance or self-righteousness. It doesn't mean that we're to spend our time grasping for power and control that we can use to enforce our vision of the kingdom on others. True, being sent by Jesus means that we're given, and entrusted with, power. But it remains Jesus' power, not our own. And it's to be exercised in ways that are in keeping with the way of Christ.

Think of how Jesus himself exercises his divine power and manifests the divine presence. He doesn't do these things primarily through dominance and coercion, but through self-giving and self-emptying love. Above all, in his suffering and his death on the cross, we see the display of God's kind of power, the power of saving mercy. And during his earthly mission, a mission that ended in crucifixion, Jesus democratized his divine power in ministry with his disciples. He made the redeeming, life-giving power of God available to and accessible to them. God's power wasn't just at work in and through Jesus but also in and through his disciples. As I said, it's still the Lord's power, but it's operative in and through his people, then and now.

This helps us stay on guard against complacency with the status quo here in the community of Christ's followers. It keeps us from thinking that if it's God's power, then let's leave it up to God to do what needs to be done, in his time and his way. The story is told of how William Carey, the "father of modern missions," was trying to convince fellow Baptists that the Great Commission required them, and not just those first disciples, to go out into all the world and make disciples. But Carey was met with fierce resistance. At one meeting, an older pastor interrupted Cary's impassioned pleas, saying, "Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid or mine."

In one respect, that man was right in trying to affirm and protect the sovereignty of God in the work of conversion and transformation. Ultimately, only God can accomplish these things. But in another respect, that man failed to appreciate something that's repeated time and again throughout the history of the church, namely, that when God wants to do something, he normally uses people to bring it about. In this particular case, as one person has summarized it, "[Carey] ended up going to India as a missionary, and as a result, inspired hundreds and thousands of other 19th-century British and American Christians to do the same. Today, millions in China, Africa, and Latin America claim Jesus as their Lord because God used some person, missionary or friend, to bring them the good news of Jesus Christ."<sup>3</sup>

Each Sunday, especially through our Missions Moment video, we see how God is using individuals and families to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to people in other parts of our nation and the world. We also see how doing so requires a network of mutual love and support. We ourselves, in this congregation, are part of that network, particularly through praying and through giving financially. Think of our prayers and gifts as forms of Christian hospitality, similar to the kind Jesus talks about in today's text from Matthew. Recall that some people traveled with the announcement of God's kingdom, while others stayed put and helped provide support and refreshment for those who were more uprooted and itinerant. And yet all were part of a community of disciples that was sent.

For most of you, being sent has a more local feel. The location of your daily mission is within the walls of your own home, or around your neighborhood or community. It's in your office or your factory. It's in your classroom or on your campus. It's at the front desk or on the desktop where you see the faces of those meeting with you online. It's in your cubicle or your conference room. It's on your floor of the hospital or in your wing of the rehabilitation center. It's in your aisle of the store or out in the park where you volunteer.

C. S. Lewis once wrote, "There is no neutral ground in the universe; every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counter-claimed by Satan." Those first ones summoned and sent by Jesus, the Twelve, knew what it was like to bear witness to the reign of God, day in a day out, in territory that was contested. "[He] gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness." And they knew that they had a solid, unchanging message to convey: "The kingdom of God is near."

As you yourself, a sent person, carry this good news into your locations each day, remember that you're part of a community of disciples where everyone is essential to the mission. Our text speaks of "prophets," those whose work focused on proclamation and miraculous demonstrations of God's power. It speaks of "the righteous," those whose work focused on pursuing justice and the restoration of relationships. It speaks of "little ones," which doesn't refer literally to "children," but is Matthew's term for "ordinary" Christians. These are disciples who may not hold a prominent office or position, but who are just as valuable to the mission of the kingdom as everyone else. The bottom line: All members of the fellowship are sent.

When we gather here each Sunday, we give praise and thanks to a missionary God, which makes us a missionary people. Our time together is, among other things, a form of Christian hospitality and network reinforcement. As you spend time with each other, sharing the week's experiences, listening to one another's stories, offering one another encouragement, holding one another up in prayer, giving one another support, you share the presence of Christ with one another, so that each may share the presence of Christ with others in their daily field of mission. Remember that when you come here, you join in refreshing your fellow disciples, giving each other "a cup of cold water" that will renew your fellow believer for the week ahead. This Lord's Day is an opportunity to replenish one another, so that you may go from here and represent Christ well in the places, and among the people, to whom you're sent.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples*, ed. Christopher J. Ellis and Myra Blythe (Norwich: Canterbury, 2005) 4.

<sup>2</sup> William H. Willimon, *How Odd of God: Chosen for the Curious Vocation of Preaching*. Kindle ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions* (Grand rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 115.