

Harassed and helpless

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert B. Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on June 15, 2008, the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost and Father's Day.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Matthew 9:36

Jesus sends forth his disciples to proclaim the good news, to teach and to heal. He assembles the twelve together to prepare them for their mission. The twelve include Andrew, James and John, burly fishermen who will fish for people. He sends Matthew the tax collector, hated by all for cheating the people as well as Simon the Zealot, a romantic social reformer and idealist. These two alone would hate each other were they not in the company of Jesus. The impetuous Peter, though he pledges his loyalty, would, in a weak moment, deny knowing Jesus. Then there is Thomas the carpenter is used to having everything squared away to exact measurements before he could accept anything. There are also Philip and Bartholomew, James, son of Alphaeus, Thaddeus, and finally Judas who, because he didn't understand Jesus' mission, would betray him in the end.

Jesus has surrounded himself with ordinary people who are expected to do extraordinary things. These twelve men don't have a clue as to where they are headed. They have no wealth or schooling; neither do they have any social status, political clout nor friends in high places. All they have is a man who brings them closer to the heart of God. Jesus warns them that they won't be received everywhere and that when they are ignored or rejected they should move on.

Our need for security today would most likely prevent us from going out after such an ideal. I admire those who venture out on a mission that holds no promise or security. I admire two high school graduates who have taken off a year before going to college to work in community service. They both have the good sense to get accepted to college before taking the year off.

When Jesus calls together the twelve, he has to deal with religious politics. Whenever I hear people say they don't believe in organized religion or that they don't like the politics of church hierarchy, I remind them that wherever people are organized for a purpose, including marriage and the family, there are the politics of human relationships. You can't get away from it because the politics of organizing people is part our being social animals. There has to be some structure to any organized group in order for it to function at all.

Jesus sees that people are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. As the chief shepherd, he prepares them to be shepherds of the souls of God's people. He sends them out to proclaim the good news that God's love saves them from all confusion, disorganization, lack of purpose. This is the beginning of changing the way with live with each other. Now we follow in that long line of disciples to do the unfinished business of Jesus' mission.

On this Father's Day, I am reminded that the politics of human relationships in the family is essential. Each generation of children thinks their parents are hopelessly out of touch with their own. Is there anything we can tell our children? Yes, there is. Will they listen? Yes, when the time is right. I am reminded of Mark Twain who, when he was a boy of fourteen, thought his father was so ignorant he could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when he got to be twenty-one, he was astonished at how much his father had learned in seven years.

It is never easy to raise children, but I always knew that the most important thing that I could do for my children was to love their mother. A stable and loving relationship with parents provides our children with a sense of security and models family relationships for their future.

Jesus preparing his disciples to go out recalls sending our children off on their own. Of course, I wondered if I had done all I could have and should have as a father. When our son, Dave finished college he wanted to be an actor. He rented a truck, filled it with what he needed, and drove off to Chicago. He had no contacts, no place to live and no job. After we waved goodbye to him as he happily drove off on his first adventure in life, his mother and I sat down and wept. We couldn't go into his empty room for a week. It was bittersweet as we were both proud and worried. As it turned out, he found a job, a place to live, and for the next five years he was in theatre productions in the Chicago area. I could no more have done something like that than fly to the moon. He has since moved to New York City and still has only a part time job, no benefits and has yet to earn anything as an actor. I have accepted this as his passion and know that he is happy with what he is doing, but that doesn't keep me from being concerned about his lack of security. I once told him, "Dave I couldn't live like you." And he replied, "Dad, I couldn't live like you."

I go down to New York to see him in plays. When he is home he not only goes to church with me, but now that I am involved in community theatre, he comes to see me on stage. It gives him no little satisfaction that his Dad is following in his footsteps. Whatever rough times we may have had when they were growing up, it is all worth it when Dave or Sarah call and I hear "Hi, Dad." It makes my day.

Nothing so easily damages human relationships as careless and thoughtless behavior, especially in marriage and parenting. It is our job as parents to teach our children to be caring and thoughtful of others. I take early morning walks with my neighbor and we notice how people leave trash from a local ice cream store on the street. Last week, when my neighbor picked up a paper napkin, he discovered a ten dollar bill wrapped up in it. Did we split it between us? No, he asked me to put it in the collection plate. So here it is.

The challenge for us today as the church to be careful and thoughtful in being the kind of people Jesus can use for his mission. It is not a matter of whether or not we are good enough or have the time, but that we are following in the steps of those early disciples in bringing people to a greater awareness of all God's creation and redemption. We are to raise those who are spiritually dead. We are to heal social outcasts who are treated like lepers who suffer from abuse, exploitation and rejection.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is our emancipation proclamation to free us from all that is wrong, thoughtless and hateful. Count it as a privilege to be in that long line of those who are part of his mission. Just as the apostles were ready when Jesus called them, so we must be ready to witness to him, wherever, whenever and with whomever we are.