

“Getting it Done”

Matthew 9:35-38

Dr. Randy Working
Christ Presbyterian Church
June 28, 2009

I’ve been a part of movements of God, when he poured out his Spirit on a church and brought it to a new level of intensity, purpose, and joy. Once was in the church where I served ten calendar years on staff, a church where 2500 people come to its Sunday services. Another was a little church that had dwindled to about 40 people coming to services, where the average age was almost 80. In both churches we saw a great new season of growth, of people coming to faith and being baptized.

What if this would be a season that God would bring about a harvest of new believers at Christ Presbyterian Church? Could this be a time when the Holy Spirit moves in a new way to convict of sin, to captivate our hearts, and to empower us for witness? Could it be a time when we see many people coming to know Jesus in a personal way?

The need is great.

It seems obvious to me how much people need God in our culture. We need more than simply converts, people with head knowledge, tickets to heaven in hand. God is looking for fully-devoted followers of Jesus Christ, disciples who can make disciples in turn. People are in our world today are hungry for God, and they don’t even know it. Did you know that a majority of people in America claim to be Christian, but most also say—70 percent in fact—that church is irrelevant to their lives. But when a person really becomes a follower of Christ, one outcome is that they get connected to the church, because it’s his body in the world. People need God, and that means they need the church.

Churches decline because they don’t know where they’re going.

But if 70 percent of people say church is irrelevant to their lives, it isn’t surprising that the mainline churches are losing members every year, and the Presbyterian Church is no different. Sure, we’re one of the biggest denominations in America at 11,000 churches and 2.5 million members, but did you know that forty years ago we had four million members? That’s a catastrophic decline! Of course, one of the major reasons is people moving from the city centers to the suburbs, and other demographic changes.

But behind that is the simple fact that we’re not winning people for Jesus Christ. I think many congregations have lost their way, and forget that that’s the church’s central purpose. It’s like the story of Alice in Wonderland. Alice arrived at a fork in the road, and looked up to see a Cheshire cat.

“Which road do I take,” she asked.

“Where do you want to go,” responded the Cheshire cat.

“I don’t know,” Alice answered.

“Then,” said the cat, “it doesn’t matter.”

If we don’t know where we’re going, and if we forget the reason God has put us here, it doesn’t much matter what we do. We can be doing good things, but not God’s things,

and so we miss out on what God wants to do here. God's will is growth, in our relationship with him, growth, in numbers. How do I know that? Because God loves the outsider, our families, our children and grandchildren, the people next door to us who play loud music we don't like.

So, could this be a great new season for growth? We don't know. Maybe we aren't humble enough, or loving enough, or we haven't really decided we want what God wants for our life together. Maybe that means we have to keep praying and waiting. But the Bible tells us that when God brings us to new growth and a season of harvest, he does it through moving us to pray.

That's why Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful." There are people who need Jesus, who are lost without him. Churches wither then they stop giving top priority to showing their community the real Jesus. That's why Jesus met physical needs, but he saw beyond that to the deepest needs of the heart. He healed people and he cast out demons and he listened and he fed the hungry. But the most important thing of all was to save people and to bring them to the Father.

We see that when John the Baptist introduced Jesus' ministry with the declaration, "'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" (Matthew 3:2) Then, when Jesus began his public ministry, he said the same thing: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." (Matthew 4:17) That is, his ministry is most importantly to announce the kingdom of God. Our most important thing is the very same thing. God calls us to care, to feed the hungry, and to heal, but the most important is to announce the good news that brings people life. It's what Jesus told his disciples as he left them:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:18b-20a)

We have to show our community the real Jesus, through word and work, with our ultimate goal of bringing them into a relationship with him. He was proclaiming the good news of salvation, and confirming it with miracles. That good news is our first priority, too. I like the way Stephen Covey put it in his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*: "the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." The main thing is to share Jesus.

In a way, our passage for this morning describes a situation a lot like ours, and it shows how Jesus responds. Let me lead us in some things that come out of the passage.

First, Jesus went to where the people were.

"Jesus went through out all their towns and villages" (9:35)

That verse appeared almost word for word in Matthew 4:23. Between chapter four and the end of chapter nine, Matthew tells how Jesus has done just that—he's gone through the towns and villages teaching, preaching the kingdom, and healing.

I'm impressed that Jesus didn't do like most churches do—build a building and then stay there waiting for people to come to him. He took the initiative and he went to them. I

think most churches in most of our life together forget the power of itinerant ministry; it's relational, it's intentional, and it's incarnational—that is, Jesus embodied the truth of the kingdom.

Second, Jesus saw human need.

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (9:36)

According to Jesus, people without him are like sheep without a shepherd. It's a picture of being lost and helpless.

I thought of that one time as I read the Los Angeles Times. I saw an article about Los Angeles artists, and I read about one performance artist who cuts himself as a part of performance art. His work is frightful—it's obscene, scary, and shocking—and the reviewer called it words like “liberating,” “insightful,” “clarifying,” and “purging.” I was overwhelmed with a sense with how confused our culture is. We call evil good, and we call good evil. Just like the ancient Canaanites, our society is obsessed with sex and death. We're completely lost.

Do you look out there and see the need, see the urgency, see it's a matter of life and death?

Third, Jesus had compassion for the people. (verse 36)

The word Matthew uses means, to be moved in your gut by pity. Do you remember a time when you felt real strong pity? When I saw the protests over the elections in Iran this week, and the brutal response of the Islamic government, I saw peaceful protesters being hosed and beaten and shot, and the hopes of the people being crushed. I was overwhelmed with a feeling of pity for a suffering people in a situation where I don't see a lot of hope, humanly speaking.

And I've wondered if I feel that pity for my unbelieving neighbors, colleagues, classmates who don't know Jesus Christ? That's what we need. We need to feel compassion because of *their* need. Our need is to care and love like Jesus did.

Maybe the starting point is to admit we don't feel compassion, we have compassion fatigue. Sometimes we get overloaded with all the suffering and need we see in the news everyday, because it's more than we can ever personally come to terms with. Maybe we need to ask God to give us eyes to see the need right around us. Jesus wasn't blind to that need. “He saw the crowds and had compassion for them.”

Fourth, notice that Jesus saw possibility.

It went beyond just seeing a need and feeling compassion; but Jesus actually saw great potential, too.

“Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful.’” (9:37)

At that point, Jesus used another image. He said unbelievers aren't just like *sheep* that are in danger. They're also like *wheat* ready to be harvested. There is not only hurt and need, but also the possibility of salvation. If we see with Jesus' vision, we see not only problems but also possibility. We look not just with compassion, but also with faith, just like he did.

I think Jesus invites us to imagine others as potential brothers and sisters in Christ? We can look at them as potential members of the body of Christ and fellow citizens of the kingdom. It makes sense, doesn't it? For us to act, to participate with God in what he's doing to bring the kingdom, we need to have eyes to see it before it comes into reality. That's faith.

Sometimes that's hard. We become jaded, and maybe we wonder if God can really bring new life. We forget the power of God to convert an unbelieving heart. Maybe we feel compassion for human need and brokenness, but to our passage this morning encourages us to see that need as opportunity for God to manifest his power. He's able to bring a harvest even to our barrenness. It doesn't depend on our skill or brilliance. Like the Lord told Zerubbabel in the Old Testament:

"Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD Almighty."
(Zechariah 4:6)

Or, like the Apostle Paul wrote,

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:3)

Out of our emptiness and frailty, God makes possibilities.

Fifth, Jesus commanded us to pray the harvest in.

"The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few, therefore *pray* the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (verse 38).

This sounds strange, but it makes an important point. Jesus isn't suggesting that God doesn't know we need workers. God cares about his harvest. But he wants to do his work of harvesting through the agency of prayer. God intends to bring a great harvest of believers, and we are the way he accomplishes that purpose in the world. It is God's way before he does a great work to do a great work in his people, so that they petition him for that work. So in a sense, God doesn't do anything through us before he does it in us.

Therefore, the sign that God is going to bring in the harvest here will be a new intensity of prayer among us. If God moves by giving you a heart of compassion for others, a great longing for them to know Jesus Christ, and a zeal for prayer, then get ready, because God is going to do powerful things, and bring a harvest.

So, our story teaches these five things:

First, Jesus moved among the people, and we need to, as well.

Second, if we're out among the people, we'll see that there's a great need in Geauga Country, just like there was in Israel.

There are people without faith, without hope, and lost like sheep without a shepherd, no matter how successful they seem.

Third, naturally, we need to have compassion for these people.

That's why it's inadequate to just keep our church as a comfortable club for those of us already on the inside. We need to care about our friends and family and neighbors who don't yet know God.

Fourth, we need to see the possibility of them coming to new life in Christ.

That means we don't concentrate on our weakness or failure, but on the power of God. What we want to see is impossible with people anyway. With God, helpless sheep can become a great harvest.

Fifth, we have to pray to the Lord of the harvest.

With prayer, our powerlessness turns into a harvest.

There's a global, nonstop prayer meeting called 24/7. It started with students in Revelation Church in Chichester, England. Since its beginning in 1999 it has spread across the world and through the Christian denominations, and it has given rise to mission involvement around the world. The heart of the movement is to fulfill the Great Commandment to love God, and that's led Christians to pray in some surprising places, like "cathedrals to nightclubs and a teepee at a New Age Festival, a van in the slums of Delhi, the British Houses of Parliament, a prison in South Africa, the U.S. Naval Academy, a shop in Northern Ireland, a surf competition in Mexico and a Brewery in Missouri."¹ Over 150,000 people visit the 24-7 web site every month, and countless ministries and mission involvements have sprung out of the fact that believers are calling out to God for a fresh outpouring of his Spirit. Those believers are already becoming a part of the answer to their own prayers, and are helping bring in the harvest.

I encourage you to join a small group of believers if you haven't already, so you can engage in the great calling of prayer, especially prayer that God might send workers for the harvest. Another thing you can consider is getting together during one of our morning services to pray that God would speak to his people during that time, pray for those worshiping and those leading in worship. One more thing is to join us at 8:30 in the morning on the Fourth of July at the township gazebo to pray for our community and nation.

Prayer is the foundation of mission, and making fully-devoted followers of Jesus Christ is the goal of mission. What might the Lord do, if we prayed for the harvest?

¹ <http://www.24-7prayer.com/> (accessed 6/27/09)