

Telltale Signs

communion meditation

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Matthew 9:35-38; 10:1, 5-11

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Beverly Gaventa, Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, is one of my favorite New Testament interpreters. Any time I encounter her work, I know I can count on two things: a solid, faithful, disciplined handling of the biblical materials and an equally faithful, insightful application of scripture to the current life of the church. She is not only an excellent scholar; she is one who takes seriously and seems to know well the particular challenges confronting the church in our day. You can understand, then, why I was delighted to encounter her treatment of today's passage [*Christian Century*, May 19-26, 1993]. More than just her usual good work, her treatment of Jesus sending the disciples on mission ripples with humor; for you see, she is dealing with one of those red letter passages that any woman daring to set her thoughts on professional ministry in the church has come up against, particularly in the last several decades.

Jesus, conventional wisdom through the ages has insisted, chose twelve MEN to be his disciples, thus setting the qualification for the church's clergy down through the centuries. Jesus obviously intended that MEN and MEN only should lead his church. Having more than a little fun, Gaventa suggests that we consider the ramifications of transforming this story from Jesus' ministry into rigid and timeless law. Looking back over the story of Jesus sending the Twelve on mission, she observes tongue-in-cheek, that if we translate Jesus' choice of men as a timeless limitation upon the church's leadership, might we not do equally well in looking at other limitations the occasion sets upon doing church today? "Go nowhere," Jesus said, "among the Gentiles . . . go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. . . . You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff."

Might we not do well, Gaventa asks, to consider that Jesus has designated for all time that the church should direct its mission solely to the Jews? Or maybe, since Jesus doesn't mention it here, we should conclude that the church's mission has nothing to do with feeding the hungry? Or worse, perhaps he is saying that the church's clergy should not be paid a salary and should move into the home of a church member.

Actually, we know very little about these twelve whom Jesus chose. Given the variations between the points at which their names are listed in the Gospels, we can't even be sure of their names. In some cases we know the name of a brother or a hometown and that's all. We know that Matthew was a tax collector and Judas was a traitor. Does this mean, Gaventa asks, that we should broadcast, "only tax collectors and traitors need apply"? We know that some were fishermen, and a Simon (not *the* Simon) was a Zealot, a revolutionary. When you get right down to it, we know very little about those chosen by Jesus and their qualifications. That, you see, doesn't seem to be the point. It isn't about who they were before they were chosen by Jesus. As a matter of fact, if we met Jesus' motley crew on the street today, *impressed* would probably not be how we would later describe our response. Recalling their petty bickering as they walked alongside Jesus, Fred Craddock at one point speaks of them as "the not-yet-ready disciples".

None of the disciples at the point of his commissioning has a lot of credit to his name. The disciples are not center stage. Jesus is. In today's passage, they are, it is true, beginning to make a significant transition. They are passing, you might say, from disciples-in-waiting to "apostles" (those sent), the only time Matthew uses the term. Yet, even now the learning curve stretches far out in front of them. They still have much to learn, and they will learn it not by touting their credentials or fluffing up their self importance. They are not being given their walking papers and sent off on their own. They will be back. They still have a long and arduous road to walk at Jesus' side. Their mission is not about setting up their own little turfdoms; it is about extending the ministry of Jesus. Repeatedly, Matthew uses the very same words to indicate that the acts first performed by Jesus, will now be performed by the disciples in his name. "Go to the lost sheep of Israel," Matthew quotes Jesus as telling them, "and preach the same message I have preached: 'the kingdom of heaven has come near'" (Mt. 4:17; 10:7). "Go and perform the same healings, exorcisms, and raisings that I have done" (Mt. 8-9; 10:8). "Go and live the same wandering, vulnerable life of self-giving poverty that I have lived" (8:20; 10:10). "Go and anticipate the same mixed reception that I have met" (7:28-29; 8:16; 10:11-15).

What we are talking about here is not just about the disciples of the first century. It is also about the church of the twenty-first century. Matthew, more than any other Gospel, is written as something of a manual for the church. Evidenced throughout his telling of Jesus' story is Matthew's concern for those in the church who call Jesus "Lord, Lord," but do not do the things that Jesus said (7:21-27). It is not about prestige. It is not about who will sit at the head of the table. It is not about who has the right to pontificate and insist upon his or her own way. It is about what happens in the presence of Jesus. And what is that? "How," John the Baptist asked Jesus, "do we know that you are the one?" "Go and tell John what you hear and see," Jesus told John's disciples: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Mt. 11:3-5). Evidence of the living Christ resides in what happens to people in his presence.

"Go," Jesus commissioned the Twelve, "proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'" And how will people know if it's true? By what happens to people in your presence: "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (10:7, 8).

For too long Christ's church has disputed over who will preside at the table and who is on the inside and who is on the outside. For too long we have quibbled over whether miracles really happen now or happened then or happened then, but don't happen now. If you want to get literal about it, if you want to take what Jesus is saying seriously, we should pay attention to the telltale signs of changes wrought in his presence—changes so magnificent, so unselfish that you can even call them miraculous.

So the question for the church today, the question for us as Grace Covenant Church is what is happening to people around us? Does our weight fall heavily and decisively on the side of healing, or does it fall on the side of strife and enmity? Are the lepers of our day finding acceptance and healing? Are the walls of prejudice that keep God's beloved children in perpetual captivity being leveled because we exist, or are they being raised and defended? Are people dying of hunger and of so many very easily treatable diseases finding access to food and health care; or do these basic human commodities remain far out of reach, behind locked doors?

There is, you see, a telltale sign that Jesus is present with us, that what we do, we do indeed do in his name, his strength, and in total consistency with who he is. That sign is the healing of broken, suffering people. That sign is the healing of our communities, nation and world.

This week I received an invitation from Gary Cook at Bread for the World inviting me to join the Circle of Protection that is currently being formed around the poorest and most vulnerable people in our world. Speaking to the process before us of seeking a more responsible, sustainable national budget, more than fifty religious leaders, representing Disciples, Mennonites, Methodists, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the National Council of Churches, Catholics, Episcopalians, Evangelicals, Hispanics and Blacks, initiated the circle, saying in one voice: "As Christians, we believe the moral measure of the debate [over the budget] is how the most poor and vulnerable people fare. We look at every budget proposal from the bottom up—how it treats those Jesus called "the least of these" [Go to www.circleofprotection.us to join the circle].

Jake Alexander, our recent speaker in the Forum on Religion and Science, came to the end of his presentation on the environment a couple of weeks ago noting the varying attitudes and roles religious people are playing or not playing in the environmental movement. He made a solemn observation: "If religions do not come together to save the earth, I can only wonder as I did some years ago, if they are of any worth."

I do not anticipate that all religious people will speak as one on the matter of the environment or the budget, but I do know that Matthew and Jesus have laid out for us a telltale sign of what it means to live and act in Jesus' name. The hungry are fed; the sick are healed; the tormented of our society find hope and restorative treatment. If we are Christ's church, that is where we will be investing our best energies. That is where we will find healing for ourselves.

It isn't about the church being proclaimed "successful" by the world in which we live. It isn't about our financial security or the extensive nature of our buildings or programs. It is about our making a profound difference—accomplishing miracles, if you will—among the most vulnerable people and in the

most broken places in our society. James Bailey states it well: "Sharing Jesus' good news invites us to enter into the movement of God's vulnerable love for the world, and in doing so we experience that love's amazing ability to transform ourselves as well as others" [James L. Bailey *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 2003].

"Go," Jesus said. "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons."

And you know what? In all of our debates over which words of scripture should be taken literally, I never hear anyone insisting on these words. But, you know, I think he meant it. "Go! Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons."

The word for us? Just do it.