

Matthew 10:40-42

June 29, 2014

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

A man was walking on the beach one day and noticed a boy who was reaching down, picking up a starfish and throwing it in the ocean. As he approached, he called out, "Hello! What are you doing?" The boy looked up and said, "I'm throwing starfish into the ocean". "Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?" asked the man. "The tide stranded them. If I don't throw them in the water before the sun comes up, they'll die" came the answer. "Surely you realize that there are miles of beach, and thousands of starfish. You'll never throw them all back, there are too many. You can't possibly make a difference." The boy listened politely, then picked up another starfish. As he threw it back into the sea, he said, "It made a difference for that one."ⁱ

Loren Eisely is the author of that short story and since the day I first heard it, it has resonated profoundly with me. Perhaps, it's because it is all too easy to stand in the position of the man who sees a world in which the problems seem simply too big to do anything about and instead of jumping in and helping it is simply easier just to sit on the sidelines and watch, critique, or pass judgement. At times even say, "Well, surely someone else will do it." The young boy in the story does not buy into that logic. While the man sees nothing but an impossible situation, the boy views it is an opportunity to make a difference in the world one starfish at a time. It is true he cannot save them all but even his small gesture of throwing one starfish back into the water means something.

Jesus brings his "missionary discourse", which began at the beginning of Chapter 10 to a close today. Recall, he sent his disciples out to proclaim the good news through word and deed all the while making it known they would not always be received warmly and the work he has called them to do in his name would be far from easy. His closing remarks shed a glimmer of hope on the mission at hand. There will be those who receive and welcome them showing to them the same hospitality that would be afforded Jesus because they are the very emissaries of their teacher, and if of him, then also of the one who sent Him into the world -- God.

Fast forward 2000 years and we are joined to that very same mission. We, too, are gathered by the Holy Spirit and then sent into the world as ambassadors of Christ. A world that at times will be very uninviting and inhospitable. The mission may even seem impossible. The message, to some, will quickly be dismissed. Yet, it is a message that matters – desperately – because it entails the people and creation that matter so much to the Creator. It is a message of hope, amazing grace, and the impossibility becoming reality through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ our Lord. New life, in the abundance of God’s goodness, is possible here and now. Reconciliation with God has happened and reconciliation with a brother or sister in Christ or a neighbor is possible.

The world we live in does have many problems that seem insurmountable. In fact, at times, the very church we love seems to have too many issues and obstacles and perhaps we wonder if we are really making a difference. Yet, the gospel message assures us that we are making a difference even if it is one individual at a time. Even the smallest of things, such as a cup of cold water, make a difference. We must not give up in the face of peril because our Lord never gave up. God calls each of us and God’s will for the “sent” church is that it works together bringing the good news to the world. Imagine what the Spirit could do if we all threw one starfish back into the water. Imagine what the Spirit could do if we all shared the good news of Jesus Christ with one person this week. Imagine what the Spirit could do if we all lived every day of our life, every breath we took, every word we spoke, truly doing so living into the promise Jesus lives within us. When we are welcomed, he is welcomed. When we are received, he is received. One person at a time. One church together. The one body of Christ united as the sent ones. Sent by the Holy Spirit. Sent with the promise we are never alone. Sent to shine the light of Christ within us. Sent to proclaim the sweet sound of amazing grace that reminds us that while once we were lost, now we have been found. Found by the One who created every starfish in the water or washed in by the tide upon sandy beaches.

Let us imagine what it might look like to be the “sent” ones of God. In this time of online worship and virtual fellowship. In this time of unrest, the sin of racism, the sin of hatred, the sin of division, the sin of supremacy over another seemingly run amuck. How do we live this out in the world? When change seems impossible. When holding the hand of another who is hurting or embracing a fellow brother or sister in a hug of love is on the list of guidelines not to do. Through the word of God proclaimed. Through the love of God poured out into our hearts. Through the

wellspring of the water of life welling over within us. Through the Spirit breathed into our being by Jesus we have all we need. We live out our identity as the sent ones by making a phone call and ensuring God is with the one with whom we are speaking to. We send a card of encouragement and love to a brother or sister in need. We read a book to gain insight into the plight of our neighbor. To understand the meaning behind words that harbor so much hatred and hurt behind them. We, as sent ones, confess our sin, acknowledge our complacency, and seek the changing of our own hearts and minds so that we can best live into our calling to be ambassadors of Christ. We invite one person at a time to experience the saving grace of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ.

Elisabeth Johnson, in her commentary on today's text, writes, "What would happen if we stopped expecting people to come on their own initiative through our church doors, and instead took seriously our calling to bring the gospel to them? What would happen if we genuinely believed that we bear the presence of Christ to every person we encounter, in every home, workplace, or neighborhood we enter? What would happen if we saw every conversation as an opportunity to speak words of grace, every interaction as an opportunity to embody Christ's love for the neighbor?"

She goes on to tell the story of an interaction a friend had with an individual bagging her items at a local grocery store. The friend had been talking with this bagger off and on for a year as she returned to the store for groceries again and again, and upon learning that she no longer worked on Sundays, invited her to come to her church, to their casual, come-as-you-are service. Much to her friend's surprise, the woman responded by giving her a hug!

Johnson reminds us, "We may not always receive such a positive response when we take the risk of reaching out, yet we may be surprised at how ready many are to receive our most humble efforts. Lest we forget what we have to offer, we have Jesus' promise: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me."ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Loren Eisely "The Star Thrower" taken from the Star Thrower Foundation website: www.starthrowerfoundation.org

ⁱⁱ Elisabeth Johnson, Commentary on Matthew 10:40-42, www.workingpreacher.org