

Sermon
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July 4, 2010

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.
The readings today are about faith and the lack of it. In the OT reading it is about the faith of Elisha and the faith (eventually) of the king's commander Naaman and the lack of faith of the King of Israel. It is about the faith of Jesus and the seventy disciples sent out by Jesus to places they had never been to bring peace and to heal.

But, in case you are missing the joke I usually start my sermons with, I will not disappoint you. Here it is:

The elderly pastor was searching his closet for his collar before church one Sunday morning. In the back of the closet, he found a small box containing 3 eggs and 100 \$1 bills.

He called his wife into the closet to ask her about the box and its contents. Embarrassed, she admitted having hidden the box there for their entire 30 years of marriage. She said that every time during their marriage that he had delivered a poor sermon, she had placed an egg in the box.

The pastor felt that 3 poor sermons in 30 years was certainly nothing to feel bad about, so he asked her what the \$100 was for.

She replied, "Each time I got a dozen eggs, I sold them to the neighbors for \$1."

Now, I have to tell you some things I believe about faith. Faith for me is not a feeling. And yet I do believe God will provide. Not good sermons or faith in our husbands or wives or even good health. I believe that God provides opportunities for service. That is based on the conviction that I need to do what I believe God is calling me to do. So, I believe that faith is action. Faith, behaving in faithful ways, is what we do for God, for others, no matter how "faithful" we feel. We don't have to have a conviction of faith inside in order to be faithful. In fact, I think it may take more strength to behave in faith when we don't have that inner conviction.

Several years ago, my son Chris called from Florida to tell me that his marriage was over. It was sudden. It felt catastrophic to him and to me. I wanted to jump through the phone to get to him, 600 miles away. I remember that. Helpless. Finally, the words that came out of my mouth were stumbling and awkward, but they were words of faith. How strange, I thought. Where did those words come from? I told him to ask God to help him walk through the pain, to show him how. I told him to send up small prayers for help, over and over, just small prayers. I told him to call a close friend. I told him to go to his church and talk with his pastor. Actually, I didn't just tell him these things. I ordered him to do them. I spoke with the kind of authority I used when he was young. I sensed that he needed that. And so, slowly, little by little, he entered his grief, began to put one foot in front of the other, and show up. Show up for his son. Show up at his church. Show up with his friends. Show up at his job. Show up. That, to me, is faith. He didn't feel faithful. He felt deserted by God. I felt deserted by God. But he had to behave as if he were going on with his life. Behave as if. I told him that if he did the work of faith that eventually feelings would follow. From Galatians today, we are told that "We will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up."

Again in Galatians, we hear: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" In our Grief Support Group here at Emmanuel, we bear each others' burdens by listening and by telling our own stories. We are becoming extraordinary listeners for each other. And there is no greater gift anyone can give to another than deep listening.

Luke's gospel tells us that the seventy were sent out in pairs, not alone. Why? We don't know because neither Jesus nor Luke tells us. Perhaps Jesus knows that we are more diligent and accountable and supported when we are sent in pairs. Maybe we are safer, less vulnerable with someone to journey with. My son needed me to journey with him for a while. Maybe there's wisdom in sending out pairs with different gifts. My son had the gift of listening to his lecturing mother, and I had the gift to find the words to tell him what he could do. Whatever the reason, the disciples were sent in pairs. Perhaps, in the mission of the wider church today, we would be better served by seeing how we can "pair" ourselves with others in ministry.

A while back, I read a story from *The Upper Room* that reminded me of my commitment to walk in faith and to serve others in whatever way God has called me. My walk in faith calls me to accept those I meet as equal to me in God's eyes and heart. My walk in faith calls me not to judge anyone by appearance or in any other way. Here is the story. The setting is South Australia. The title of the story is: *Someone I Have Judged By Appearance*.

I arrived at the bus stop with my three-year-old son and looked at the other commuters already there. One woman stood out because of her stern face, seemingly set in permanent lines of unyielding harshness. I wanted to sit as far away from her as I could. My son, however, not given to rash judgments, approached the bench where she was sitting, looked into her eyes, and engaged her in conversation. "Hello. What's your name?" he asked, placing a small hand on her knee. I could not believe my eyes; the woman's stern face was transformed and her eyes softened as she responded to the irresistible charm of a small, friendly child.

His actions and her response caused me to think about the way we respond to others. How often do we miss out on rich relationships because we do not make an effort to get to know people we have judged to be not worth the effort?

I am reminded of what Jesus said: *When you have ministered to others, you have ministered unto me.* Jesus touched people whom others shunned

The seventy, sent out by Jesus, became the hands and feet, and heart, and mind of Jesus in the world. Jesus still needs hands and feet and hearts and minds. The harvest is still great. The workers are few. These seventy were not religious professionals or rabbis, but common, ordinary people like us. We ordinary people are called to be the leaders of the mission of outreach in our community. And from the Psalm appointed for today: *Sing to the Lord and give thanks*. When we do God's work for others, I think we are truly singing to God.

The disciples are told to carry no extra clothes, no provisions. What is behind this? Is this stepping out in faith? What if I say that I will do what God calls me to do for others...if I'm not inconvenienced in any way? That puts me first and God, maybe second. While those of you who go on mission trips to Mississippi and Iowa and Belize would not think of traveling with just the clothes you are wearing, I do know that you are also not going for your own comfort; you're not on vacation, and you're not going to a resort area. You are going to do God's work in the world and it is difficult and sweaty and back-breaking work. In any work we do for outreach or inreach, we would do well to remember it is not about us. It is always about God and what God is calling us to do. Faith. It's what we do.

Throughout the Bible and today, God chooses to use flawed, fallible human beings like us as witnesses and workers for God's world. Wherever the disciples went, they preached and healed and they planted a church in a village or town. This is how our church got started back in the first century. The disciples whose hearts were on fire with the Holy Spirit had not gone to seminary. They had not been ordained. These were the laity. They were us. From farm to farm, from village to village, and town to town, moving across the whole known world of the first century like a spreading flame.

And remember, when we perform acts of kindness, when we inconvenience ourselves for those in need, when we listen to another's grief, we are not just bringing help to people in need, we are planting churches. Each of us is a kind of church. So faith to me is not about confidence and conviction. Faith is what we do because it is what is right and it is what we are called to do.

In the Cursillo movement we are told, in the words of St. Teresa of Avila:

"Christ has no body now, but yours.

No hands, no feet on earth, but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which

Christ looks with compassion into the world.

Yours are the feet

with which Christ walks to do good.

Yours are the hands

with which Christ blesses the world."

So, let us go out today and be God's blessings and churches in the world. **Amen.**