

**Series: The Words of Jesus (Private Instructions)**

**Today: Commissioning the Disciples**

**Text: Matthew 10:5-15**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**

**Sunday, January 25, 2009**

**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

*“Tell me your dreams for the people of this church?”* The question caught me off guard. It is not that I don’t have dreams for this congregation. I do. They are contained in the vision of our church: *Discovering the Heart of Christ in the Heart of the City*.

The questioner was a seminary student doing a paper on pastoral leadership; and so I asked her if I could think about this as I wrote my sermon this week and see if I could become more specific.

This morning’s message is an attempt to answer her question. The poet, T.E. Lawrence wrote, *“All people dream, but not equally. They who dream by night, in the dusty recesses of their mind, wake in the day to find that it is vanity; but the dreamers of the day are dangerous people for they act out their dreams to make it possible.*

Jesus had dreams for his disciples that he dreamed in the daytime; dangerous dreams about what they might accomplish in building up the Kingdom of God. This morning I would like to talk with you about how those dreams might help us to understand our call and our commission as disciples of Jesus Christ.

In the first four verses of Matthew 10 we learn that Jesus called 12 ordinary men from their very ordinary lives and gave them extraordinary powers so that they might spread the good news of God’s reign upon the earth. These were the men we call the apostles. The word apostle means one who is sent out. So Jesus called 12 men to send them out and proclaim the good news of God’s reign in the lives of all people. To be sure that people would listen to them, he gave

them extraordinary powers which made them extraordinary men who would gain the attention of those to whom they were preaching.

Then comes their commission, and in that commission he shares his dreams for what they might accomplish. This is my summation of that commission: 1) Start Where You Are; 2) Trust the Power of God; 3) Seek the Support of Others.

### **Start Where You Are**

The first instruction which Jesus gives to his followers seems a strange one. *Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the House of Israel (v.5)*. In other words, don't go looking for some exotic call in your life. Start right where you are in spreading the good news of the Kingdom of God.

Remember, this is early on in the work of the followers of Jesus. All of the people Jesus is speaking with are Jews, and this is Matthew's recollection of the commissioning. From Matthew's perspective, Jews always come first. They are the chosen people of God; the ones who deserve God's special favor. More than this, they are the people whom the 12 disciples know. They are family, and friends, and coworkers, and neighbors. Later, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gives the instructions to go into the entire world and make all people his disciples (Matthew 28), but as for now they are to start with the people they know.

I read a story about a man who took this seriously and started in his own neighborhood. We might have met a man like this last week when our friends from Brightside Baptist visited. In fact, this man could have easily been a member of Lou Butcher's church because I know Lou has people like this in his church.

The man's name was Vance; an African-American living in a predominately Hispanic neighborhood, and as such he stands out. But what really sets Vance apart is that he is a servant-

hearted father who cares not only for his own kids, but also for the many other kids who play in the streets by his building.

One night at 9 p.m., there was a knock at Vance's door. A 16-year-old Hispanic boy, who lives a few doors down, needed help tying his tie. He had a big presentation at school the next day, and he had no father to help him get ready. Those of us who still wear ties can identify with that, can't we? I mean who was it who taught you to tie the tie you are wearing this morning?

After Vance had finished tying the tie, the boy sheepishly asked, "Do you have a pair of black dress shoes I could borrow?" Immediately, the Spirit brought to Vance's mind the \$60 pair of shoes in his closet that he hadn't even taken out of the box yet. He was certain God was telling him to give the boy those shoes. Vance cringed inside. He told the boy to wait at the door as he headed into the apartment to look for any pair of shoes but the expensive pair. Before he went to the closet, though, he told his wife what he sensed the Spirit was saying to him. She agreed that it sounded like God had given him a great idea. So Vance got out his new shoes and brought them to the boy. His last hope was that they wouldn't fit. After all, how many 16-year-olds have size-12 feet? They fit perfectly.

Just a few weeks after Vance gave away his new shoes, he and his wife sensed God telling them to start a Bible study for the kids in their building. After much prayer, they decided to invite the kids to their apartment for a Sunday evening study. They ordered four Bibles in case any kids came. That Sunday, seven kids showed up at Vance's apartment—led by the 16-year-old owner of a new pair of black shoes. The following week they ordered more Bibles, and 14 kids showed up—led by the boy in the new pair of black shoes.

You don't have to go to a distant country to see where the need is and reach out to meet it. Who would have thought the kingdom of God would come to the kids of that apartment

complex just because one man chose to give away a new pair of shoes? Start with what you know. Think about the people in your neighborhood who need to hear the good news of God's love, and translate it into language they can understand.

### **Trust the Power of God**

As Jesus shares his dream with those first disciples, they may well of wondered if he was really serious. I mean, no one would have blamed them if they would have said, *"This is more than we are equipped to handle."*

The job description for a new disciple was demanding: to proclaim good news; heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the leper and cast out demons. I am sure you will agree that if every follower of Jesus was expected to carry out these activities, there might be fewer of us who would claim to be followers of Jesus. Yet Chapter 10 begins with the statement that he gave the disciples authority to do these things. It is a pretty tall order, unless they believe that it is by the power of God and not their own power, that they will be able to do these things.

On Wednesday at our Early Word Bible Study someone raised the question if the same power was still available to those who want to follow Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After a good deal of discussion, we decided that power to do all these things still belongs to God, and the task of modern day discipleship was simply to place ourselves at God's disposal and let God do the rest.

Consider the work of Mike and Marie Meaney of Bellevue, Washington. They have a unique ministry in their retirement years. After completing 40 years in their respective careers as caterer and teacher, they knew God wasn't through with them. Sensing God's direction, Marie, on her 60th birthday, flew to Lusaka, Zambia, Central Africa, to assess needs of teachers and students. She returned home and began writing a curriculum for children at risk. She developed teacher-training seminars and raised money for African schools.

Mike, a double amputee, found his heart touched by the many disabled people he saw in Africa, where disabled people are often perceived as having little value and are cast off with minimal help from the government. In response to the need they saw, Mike and Marie developed a non-profit ministry called Africa Village Classrooms. Their work grew to include evangelizing remote villages and the adopting of 50 orphans. Mike is happy to say, "God took my feet and told me to go!" When he puts his arms around a little handicapped child, words are needless. He is in that moment the personification of Christ's love.

Through the generosity of American Christians, wheelchairs, surgeries, and other helps are being provided. A school for the blind has been established in Wamala. Mike and Marie joyfully watch God raise people up from the dirt to being able to walk or use a wheelchair.

At age 67, the Meaney's say they are still having the time of their lives. Has it been difficult? "Oh yes," they say, "but every difficulty is far outweighed by blessing. We know the source of our strength and resources."

### **Seek the Support of Others**

The final part of the dream that Jesus has for his disciples is to seek the support of others. Don't waste time and energy on those who are anxious to tear down your attempts at faithfulness. Jesus told his disciples not to waste time on negative people; not to waste time on people who demonstrated that they were not interested in receiving the good news of God's reign on the earth. Seek those who will be honest with you and encourage you to be the best that you can be. There is more than enough to do without spending our energy debating the efficacy of the Gospel with those who are not ready to receive the good news it brings. Seek those who will support you in your efforts and allow those who have difficulty with your message the room they need to see the change it makes in your life and be attracted to that change.

About 25 years ago there was a wise old preacher who gave some great advice to me when I had taken my first position as a senior pastor. He said, "*Randy, as a leader in the church you are always going to face criticism about the decisions you make. Some of those you want to weigh. Some of those you will simply count. You are never as bad as your worst critic says you are, nor are you as good as*

*your best supporter believes you are. Stick with people you trust to be on your side, and let the others go.”*

Jeff Jernigan illustrates this in his book, The Power of a Loving Man. He writes:

*I was poor in math until I hit eighth grade. For some now unfathomable reason, I found it easier to cheat and get failing grades than study and get passing grades. My math teacher caught me cheating but never told my parents. He had the grace to help me see the difference between what I was becoming and what I could be. He came alongside with helps that appropriately addressed self-esteem, learning skills, and socialization. I was pretty much an introvert in those days. What he did was always exude optimism about my potential and the inevitability of becoming an A student. He created a space into which dropped hope. I became as hopeful as he was.*

*He sheltered me from the ridicule of other students and the rejection of my parents, and had nothing but confident expectation in my ability to succeed. I did succeed. To this day, I'm the math whiz in the family. I never cheated again.*

*My world is a far different place now, not simply because I succeeded at junior high math. It's different because in the eighth grade someone breathed hope into my life—and showed me how to breathe it into the lives of others. When I became a believer a decade later, this lesson took on new meaning. (Source: Jeff Jernigan, *The Power of a Loving Man* (B&H Publishing Group, 2006))*

All of us need someone in our lives to support us in the difficult times of the work we are called to do as followers of Jesus. Find the people in your life that are your support team and let the negative people go.

### **Conclusion**

So these are my dreams for you, the people of this church in your attempts to live out what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ: 1) that you will start right where you are, whether it be in your home, in your school, in your work, in your neighborhood, wherever God has placed you. You don't need to witness to the whole world. Witness where you can be effective; to the lives of those who know and trust you; 2) That you will learn to trust the power of God working through you and know that God is able to do through you more than you can imagine or even grasp if you will be faithful to God; and 3) That you will surround yourself with loving people who will affirm you in your desire to witness to the power of God in your life.