

Sermon (6/18/17, Matthew 10: 5-23):

A recent help wanted ad made this enticing offer. *Tired of working for only \$9.75 per hour? We offer profit sharing, flexible hours and benefits. Starting pay: \$5-\$7 per hour.*

*Waitress wanted: Read another. Must be 18 years old with 20 years' experience.*

*Cab Drivers Wanted: Nights and Weekends. Must have good driving record and criminal record.*

*Surgeon Wanted for a new health clinic opening in the area. No experience needed. Must have own tools.*

These ads remind us that writing a good help wanted ad can be tricky and, as I've learned from ads we've had to place of late, pricey. Most of that pricing is based on how many words you use so great care must be taken to ensure the ad is accurate, informative, to the point, and eye-catching while using as few words as possible.

Reading today's passage from Matthew made me wonder what a help wanted ad might look like for the kind of positions Jesus is trying to fill in today's passage.

*Missionaries wanted. Qualifications: Must be able to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. No experience necessary. Compensation: tips from grateful families. Nerves of steel, thick skin, and a high tolerance for physical pain a must.*

I know what you're thinking. Where do I sign up?

I was a business major in college and, as part of that, I was required to take several advertising classes. We studied all kinds of things, hoping to find ways to entice people to try our product. We looked at the differences in how customers were wired and the shopping patterns people had. Men, for example, tend to be very different shoppers than women. There's also a reason why milk is always located in a back of the grocery store. We then experimented with our own advertising campaigns.

Admittedly, it was in these classes where I began to feel very uncomfortable about this major I had chosen. So much about advertising felt deceptive and manipulative. Its intention is to create a sense of need that wasn't there before.

‘If you want to be happy then you need this...’ ‘If you want to feel safe then you need this...’ ‘If you want to be successful then you need this...’ ‘If you want to have fun then you need this...’ ‘If you want to feel sexy and popular then you need this...’

It all felt very controlling, dishonest, and sometimes even a bit mean-spirited. I understood it’s the way things work and it’s what drives our economy and greases the wheels of industry but it just felt wrong. It was so different than what I had in mind when I started. I thought the main job of advertising was to simply get the word out there about something we wanted to sell – a product, a service, an opportunity. Information, basically, so that people might be aware these things existed so they could tap into them when they were needed or wanted.

I think Jesus would have failed miserable in these classes. Subtlety wasn’t exactly Jesus’ strong point. Stretching the truth to entice people was not a part of Jesus’ vocabulary. Jesus tended to be quite upfront, brutally honest, and direct.

‘For those who want to save their lives will lose them but for those who are ready to lose their lives for my sake will save their lives.’ He once said.

Yes, there was no shortage of surprise when it came to Jesus’ cut-to-the-chase words. They were hard and still are. They were brutally honest and still are. They were also life giving and still are.

Today’s passage is a good case in point. ‘Go and share the message of the Gospel.’ He said. ‘Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the leper.’

While we might be tempted to think that this means we’re supposed to go to the local medical clinic and start calling out evil demons or head down to Rockefeller funeral home and resurrect a few of the folks they have down there, I don’t think that’s what Jesus had in mind *nor* would I advise it. Instead, I think Jesus is simply reminding us that the church is not supposed to imitate Jesus’ ability to do these things but to join in with this kind of work that Jesus is already doing in the world. To advocate for people’s access to medical care, to stand up for the voiceless, to call attention to those alienated by racial and social injustice, and to seek relief from oppressive systems that bleed the life out of our communities.

‘In order to do this,’ Jesus warns, ‘be honest, be humble, be courageous, be generous, be brave, be tenacious for I am sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves. The cost will be great. The work will be dangerous. The consequences will be quite daunting.’

Jesus was not naïve. Jesus understood that the Gospel would greatly upset the power structures and societal operations of the day and, frankly, make some people mad...really mad.

“You will be dragged before judicatories.” Jesus warned. “You will be beaten down even by people in your own church. Brother will betray brother, a father his child, children will rise up against parents, and you will be hated by many because you’ve taken my name to heart.”

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Something just didn’t feel right in those advertising classes I took. Being so young, I had trouble putting my finger on it. My assumption was that it was personal failure. This is just the way things are, I kept trying to convince myself. It’s what you must do to survive, to get by, to earn a living.

While the verse, ‘for those who seek to save their lives will lose them,’ was not something that came to my mind back then, it is, I think, what I was feeling. Tiny little holes were being poked into the fabric of my being and something precious was slowly leaking out, namely life.

This is a time of year when many are making important transitions as they graduate from High School, College, or Graduate School. Some will move on to the next level of schooling while others will be moving on to new careers and jobs. If you are one of these, Jesus words are helpful. If you are not, these words are an important reminder.

Doing the right thing can sometimes be lonely. Seeking the just thing can sometimes make us feel uncomfortable in systems which we have resigned to the unavoidable inevitable. Being involved in professions of healing, service, protecting, community care, and building up are often the same vocations that are least honored with the kind of appreciative compensation they deserve. Being compassionate and loving can be costly. Sharing and being the message of grace often pushes against the grain of societal norms, which can lead to scorn and even rejection.

Weekly reports of violence are a constant reminder of just how hard civility, let alone grace, has become.

Sometimes the right thing is not the easy thing. Sometimes the good thing is not viewed as the honorable thing. What is at stake here, though, is our humanity. Those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake will find life or, as Jesus phrases it in today's passage, the one who endures will be saved. And I think what Jesus meant by being saved is not in some great by and by paradise but the saving of our humanity in the here and now. As challenging as it might be, to live as Christ challenges us to live is to plug those tiny holes where life's precious vitality is slowly seeping out of our being.

It's not an easy thing to do. There is often not a clear divide that makes it easy for us to discern where the good begins and the not so good ends. Life is complicated. What may have started with good intentions sometimes goes the way of a slow creep into harm and corruption. Choosing the battles we take on might mean leaving other things undone. Using our energies to be Christ's grace requires us to tap into our every reserve so that we can hang in there for the long haul. Even with the best of efforts, failure is sometimes the result, which, I think, is the reason Jesus instructed his disciples to be ready to shake the dust from their feet and move on. Feelings of failure, however, doesn't always mean we're wrong. Above all, it's important to remember that we are not being called to be Christ but to be helpers of this Jesus who is doing what we can't including healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, and casting out demons.

As hard and as challenging as it is, it's important to remember that doing nothing ultimately leads to the loss of being alive. To completely ignore the discomfort Jesus' words cause is to ignore the very things that make life most worth living. To content ourselves with the corruption that defines our age because we think it's rule over us is unbudgeable is to underestimate the authority Jesus has given to those whom he has called. To not be involved in the redeeming work of Christ means resigning ourselves to those things that steal away our humanity.

To be sure, it's probably the most challenging 'help wanted' sign

we'll ever encounter but the question is not 'can we afford to respond' but 'can we afford to ignore it'.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

## Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

***People: And also with you.***

Leader: Let us pray...

Gracious God, you challenge us today. As you have done to the prophets, leaders, and followers of old, you have done to us. You have prodded our consciences, provoked our sensibilities, and awakened our sleepy though wiser parts of our human spirits. You have blessed us with new insights, even insights that cause us discomfort. You have called us to a new day, where the old must be reviewed and, if needed, discarded so that a more grace filled hope might be birthed.

Do not desert us in this high calling, we ask. Grant us both the courage and the stamina we need to be sent out in your name. Remind us, especially in low moments, that the authority you have given us is sufficient and more powerful than we often think.

We pray this day especially for the lame and all those who are ill, frail, and suffering. We pray for those who are entrapped by demons of addiction and self-destructive behavior. We pray for those who are outcast and bear the brunt of our social prejudices. We pray for those who grieve from the loss caused by death, broken dreams, dashed hopes, and crumbling relationships. We pray for those faithful servants who know the hurt and anxiety of being sheep in the midst of wolves.

We also offer to you, O God, our thanksgiving for this place of worship and for the supportive love and grace we find here. We thank you especially for Marie and Emily as they embark upon the new journeys you have prepared for them. Bless them, keep them safe, and provide us with a determination to love them through all the ups and downs they will experience. We also pray, O Lord, for these things we now hold before you in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

**All:** *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.*