

Good for Something

Matthew 28:16-20

Rev. Dan Schumacher

In Matthew, the story doesn't end with the disciples unsure of what to do next. It doesn't end with them trying to find someone to replace Judas. It doesn't end with the expectation of the Holy Spirit's arrival. It doesn't even end with Jesus' ascension.

The gospel of Matthew ends with the Jesus speaking; with the voice of Jesus. It ends with Jesus commissioning the apostles to take the gospel into the world and with his promise that he would be with them always.

It wasn't just a commissioning for the first to follow – but a commissioning for *all* who would follow.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:18-20).

It's like he's talking right past the apostles and speaking to us.

You, (name), go and make disciples of all nations.

You, (name), go and make disciples of all nations.

You, (name), go and make disciples of all nations.

You, (name), go and make disciples of all nations.

Can you imagine Jesus calling your name? Can you imagine Jesus sending you to the high, desolate mountains of Chile to share the gospel? Or to the deep interior of the Amazonian rainforest? To the far reaches of the Sahara? Can you imagine Jesus sending you to the frozen tundra of Fargo, North Dakota?

When a friend of mine told me that he'd accepted the call to serve as a full-time youth minister in Honolulu, Hawaii, my immediate reply was, “Boy that's a tough call. Really suffering for Jesus, huh?”

Can you imagine Jesus sending you to Honolulu or to Cabo San Lucas or to Cancun? That wouldn't be so bad. I'd suffer for Jesus there.

But what about North Korea? Or Afghanistan? Would you go?

It makes perfect sense to me that Jesus would command the apostles to go, because the word *apostle* literally means “*one who is sent*.” So we shouldn't be surprised that the gospel of Matthew closes with Jesus literally telling the apostles to go: “Go! Get on! Get! Get a move on. It's time to live up to your title. You want to be an apostle? Then go.”

But is he speaking to us, too? Or is this the kind of commissioning reserved only for missionaries and traveling evangelists? What about us every day saints? How are we to live the great commission if we rarely leave our city, let alone our country?

Can we be sent, even if we don't go anywhere?

Let me ask that another way: do we have to go somewhere to be considered sent by God? Or is being sent about something deeper than geography?

In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor says that vocation isn't *what* we do, but *how* we do it. She says that vocation is simply the practice of living with purpose (107).

In my life so far, I have been a paperboy, a fast-food worker, a pool lifeguard for a summer camp, a janitor, a pizza delivery person, a roofer, a furniture builder, a printer at a small publishing house, a woodworker for a photography studio, a youth pastor, a librarian, an interviewer for the Wyoming State Folklore Society, a maintenance worker for a seminary dormitory, a young adult ministry intern, a teaching assistant for Biblical Greek and Biblical Hebrew, and a pastor – and those are just the jobs I got paid for.

I still haven't given up hope on becoming a college professor, a master carpenter, a published author of a book, a spiritual retreat center director, an ultra marathoner, or – a real shocker if you know me at all – a fly fishing guide on one of the big trout rivers of Montana or Wyoming.

Those jobs have taught me skills that I would never have learned without them. Even more importantly, every job that I've ever had has brought me into relationship with a crowd of people that I might never have discovered any other way.

For instance, as a fast-food worker in high school, I discovered that being part of an assembly line is not near as glamorous as Henry Ford made it out to be. And I learned that some people who I had assumed were slackers because they always slept through class had actually been just at work until late into the night in order to help their parents pay rent. That's quite the opposite of a slacker.

As a roofer, I was on a new location working for a new client every few days. Some clients would bring us out slices of pie and cups of coffee around 10 AM each day insisting that we take a break. Others would yell at us for making too much noise – but we never exactly knew how to resolve that issue short of not nailing their shingles down.

As an intern for a young adult ministry at a wealthy congregation, I learned very quickly that money is a whole lot like a microphone – it does not fix mistakes, it only amplifies them. I've never met so many young people with so many resources at their disposal, *and yet* so many unresolved issues. It turns out there are some things money simply cannot solve – like the tragic death of a younger sister or the shame and low

self-esteem that are caused by an abusive father. But I have also never met a group of people hungrier to experience the liberating power of Jesus' love, either.

Over the course of holding all of these jobs, I have learned that some people work so hard for so little that just going to work reinforces their sense of not being worth much. And I have learned that even people who are well-paid can dread getting up in the morning. Some years ago, the physician Larry Dorsey observed that more heart attacks occur between 8:00 and 9:00 AM on Monday mornings than any other time during the week (cited by Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 112). Now what do you suppose that suggests about the way we see our jobs?

The poet, Henry David Thoreau, once said, "Do not be too moral. You may cheat yourself out of too much life. Aim above morality. Be not simply good; be good for something."

Here's the thing: we do not want to feel like our lives are being wasted. What we want is *to be good for something*.

For us Christians, that might just mean living with such purpose that our lives become the fulfillment of the Great Commission even if we never go anywhere.

I don't mean carrying gospel tracts with you everywhere you go — though you might. What I mean is striving to see each person you encounter as Jesus does — and then treating them as Jesus would.

Our Great Commission isn't about *what* we do for a living, but *how* we live. Martin Luther said it like this: whatever our jobs in the world happen to be, our mutual vocation is to love God and love neighbor.

But sometimes it's still hard to believe that we're making much of a difference in the world.

I keep thinking this week about the story of "The Star Thrower."

He was a scientist on vacation, roaming the beach, seeing what the ocean had left on its sandy shore the night before. His name was Loren Eiseley, and he saw with the eye of a scientist. As he looked at the shore, he saw natural selection at work. He saw shells with tiny animals inside, he saw a small octopus dying on the sand, and he saw hundreds of starfish that the stormy waters had washed ashore. "In the end," he mused darkly to himself, "the sea rejects its offspring."

He continued walking until he walked around a bluff — the sun now rising, and there before him "a gigantic rainbow... had sprung into existence." Near the foot of the rainbow, he saw a human figure. He could hardly make it out. The figure was looking down. It stooped and flung some object beyond the breaking surf. As Eiseley drew close, he saw the man reach down again and pick up a... starfish.

"It's still alive?" he asked.

"Yes," said the man, and he took the star and spun it far into the sea. "It may live if the offshore pull is strong enough," he said gently.

"Do you collect?" Eiseley asked.

"Only for the living," the man said, and he stooped and threw another star. "The stars," he said, "throw well. One can help them."

As he walked on, he reached a bend in the shore, turned back, and saw the man stoop and throw another.

"For a moment," Eiseley later wrote, "in the changing light, the sower appeared magnified, as though casting larger stars upon some greater sea. He had... the posture of a god."

But then Eiseley's eyes refocused and he entered into an internal debate about nature's law of tooth and claw, where death is some sad rule of progress. He recalled Freud and the inner struggle between darkness and light in the human soul. He remembered the twisters that destroyed his boyhood home. He remembered the biblical injunction, "Love not the world... neither the things that are in the world."

And he thought to himself, "But I *do* love the world. I love its small ones, the things beaten in the strangling surf, the bird singing, which flies and falls and is not seen again... I love the lost ones, the failures of the world." And he said to himself, "I must go back and find the star thrower."

When Eiseley reached the man, he picked up a still-living star himself and spun it far out into the waves.

"Call me another thrower," was all he said to the man. And he picked up another and flung it into the sea. He could feel the movement of his body in the repetition of the throwing. It felt *good*. "It was like sowing — the sowing of life..." (Shoemaker, *GodStories*, 317-319).

With the Great Commission, Jesus sends us to sow life. But he isn't asking us to do it alone or under our own power. "And remember..." he says, "remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

He doesn't just come to the missionaries or the traveling evangelists. He comes to you, too. And he hands you a star and says, "You are a thrower too."

Only he says it like this: "Go and make disciples... teaching them everything I've taught you. And remember, I am with you."

Friends, the aim of the Christian vocation is higher than to simply be good; it's to be good for something.

May we sow life wherever we go, because wherever we go *is* where we have been sent.

Amen.