

Genesis 22:1-14

Psalm 13

Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10:40-42

When I was a little girl, sometimes I got to go grocery shopping with my mother or to the hardware store with my Daddy. Those were always exciting outings for me. I usually got to see all kinds of things I'd never seen before and I also had a front row seat to my parents' conversations with total or relative strangers. Every now and then we would run into some one that we already knew, but most of the time they were striking up conversations with people they'd never seen before. I was always fascinated that they could think of things to say to people they didn't know. But remember, that was back in the day when everyone asked a new acquaintance three questions: Where do you live? Where do you work? And where do you go to church? Because almost everybody went to church somewhere or had a religious affiliation of some kind. I was always a little awe struck by how many times the conversation then turned to religion and faith...and if it was a conversation about Christianity...to Jesus. It never once occurred to me that such a conversation could actually be mission work. But now that I think about it, I did hear each of my parents invite someone to church on more than one occasion.

The scripture passage that we heard this morning comes at the end of Jesus' discourse to his disciples on their mission in the world. Jesus has gone into great detail about what he wants them to do; about how he wants them to go into the world; about the resistance and the trouble and even the dangers that they will encounter; and about the disruptions in their lives because of their decision to do this mission work and what it might cost them in terms of established family relationships and old friendships. By necessity this mission that Jesus has mapped out for them must be to them the most important thing in their lives and Jesus makes that very clear.

In twenty-first century America, some things have changed, but human nature remains remarkably the same from one millennium to the next. What the disciples were worried about...losing their families and their relationships of long standing...is something that we still worry about today. No one wants to feel alienated from family or friends. So how do we pursue our mission if we are not going to walk out into the world two by two with no money and no provisions and no place to stay? That's what the original disciples did, but that's not necessarily the plan for us.

Most of us are going to be doing our mission work from right where we are. Only occasionally are we given an opportunity to provide food and lodging for a missionary from another country. Most of the hospitality we share will be right here with people who live right here. And the missions starts with basic hospitality, but is so much more than that.

Thinking back to those conversations that my parents had in the grocery store or the hardware store or over the backyard fence, I realize that those conversations were actually mission work. It doesn't look the same as what we envision when we think about 'missionaries' but it is, nevertheless the spreading of the word. And how it is received is what Jesus is focused on in the lesson this morning. He tells his disciples that whoever welcomes them also welcomes Jesus and whoever welcomes Jesus welcomes the one who sent Jesus. And Jesus goes on to say that whoever welcomes a righteous person will receive the reward of a righteous person. And whoever gives even a cup of cold water to a little one in the name of a disciple will not lose their reward. None of them will.

So think about mission work as part of your everyday life. Jesus is not necessarily telling you that you have to sell your house and move out of the country. Maybe the mission work that you are to do involves

engaging people you meet in conversation and making them feel so welcomed in your presence that they are willing to listen to you speak of Jesus or be willing to share with you their experience with Jesus...good or bad. Mission work is all about building relationships. It's about making people feel welcomed and at ease. It's one step beyond our customary thoughts of hospitality. If you are working with someone who has shared some stories with you or has gotten to know you and you have gotten to know them, maybe just extending the conversation to sharing your own conviction about faith is the mission that Jesus has planned for you.

You never know when re-telling your own story to someone who feels comfortable with you might be just the impetus they need to look a little closer or even to try again if they've had a bad experience somewhere along the line...like the person who's talking about Jesus, but won't take "No" or even "No, thank you" or "Not now" as an answer. Being welcoming and hospitable is as much about listening to someone, putting them at ease, being accepting of them as it is anything else. Maybe that's the mission that's been planned for you...listening and putting someone at ease...making someone feel 'safe' with you. It's a different kind of networking than what we think about in the business world or even in casual social situations.

Sometimes we think of networking as self-serving or as using people in order to get ahead. If we are networking so that we can share the gospel then that's a different kind of networking.

In this day and age, it's unlikely that you're going to be able to engage someone in conversation at the grocery store or at the hardware store on a level that will allow you to share your experience with the gospel with them, but you never know. It all starts by listening. If you're a good listener and you've turned your mission work over to the Holy Spirit to direct, you won't have to do much, if any, planning about how to introduce the subject. The Holy Spirit will do that for you and you'll hear yourself saying remarkable things that you had not planned in advance.

So we know that mission work...here at home as well as in foreign places...is laced with prayer. It is fueled by prayer...just as we are. So prayer has to blanket all our efforts to share the gospel. And sometimes, what we share doesn't have to be a banquet of information. Maybe what we have to share is a sip of cold water to someone new to the faith...a little one in Christianity...that will find that cup a water to be exactly what they needed...not too much and not too little.

And sometimes our mission work...our witness...is completely non-verbal which always surprises me. But people do pay attention to how we act. They do pay attention to how we treat other people...particularly people that are hard to get along with. They do notice how we handle ourselves and what kinds of decisions we make. Are we reflecting the love of Jesus to others in the decisions we make or in the things we do or are we just paying lipservice to it? Nobody is going to invest in it or want to know more if what they're seeing is lipservice.

Like everything else in life, living our lives with mission in mind takes a willingness and it takes a lot of prayer and it takes patience and it requires continuously learning new skills. Jesus never said mission work would be easy. As a matter of fact, he said it would be hard and sometimes it would be dangerous. We don't have to worry so much about being in physical danger, but we might be in social danger.

Think about how you want to welcome people...how you want to put them at ease...how you want to make them feel safe with you...how you want to share Christ's love with them without ever saying a word.

They will know. Even Jesus said, “They will know you are my disciples by the way you love one another.” That love fires all of us up and makes it possible for us to spread that kind of love and service and tender care.

Mission work is Jesus work. Mission work is ongoing. Mission work begins at home and at work and exactly where you are wherever you are. And Jesus walks with you every step of the way.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.