

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury
Sermon – June 12, 2005
“Making a Difference”

Romans 5: 1-11, Matthew 9:35-10:8
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This morning's lessons are rich with familiar metaphors and words of wisdom for struggling disciples. (Rich perhaps, but not always easy to understand.) We hear the familiar admonition “the harvest is great, but the workers are few.” To this we can relate. We lament the decline of church membership. We wonder why the children that grew up in the church are not raising their own children in the church. Yet, the recent confirmation of 21 young people is reason to rejoice. Their passion, commitment and energy gives us hope that Christ's ministry is in good hands.

In this morning's lesson from Matthew's gospel, Jesus instructs his disciples to *cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons*. Is that possible today? We wonder, who is sick? Is sickness limited to people? What is dead? Is death limited to people? Where are the lepers; where do demons dwell in our communities? If the church would or could touch these places, the whole world would be convinced that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.

It is very easy to feel like the mass of people in today's lesson. Jesus said they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. And yet, we also hear that Jesus had compassion for them. Have you ever felt that way? Jesus looked at all these people and their many needs and knew he could not minister to them himself. Therefore, he found himself some helpers. That is where we come in.

We are the helpers Jesus calls to make a difference in the world in simple, yet profound ways. There is a place for you in the harvest. We are not all called to do the same thing. Some of you may be healers. Others may bring life to places that once appeared to be dead. Where are those dark places? Is there something in your life that has died? So often we try to hide our darkness, deny the death that is encroaching, or pretend it will all go away. So often, we are wrong. It is then that God sends people to help us face the painful truth about ourselves. Jesus does not intend us to do this work alone. He commissioned those first disciples and sent them out in pairs. This is incredibly important. We need the support of other disciples. We need to know that there is a community praying for us, waiting to hear from us, and hoping the best for us.

Jesus charged those first disciples to change people's lives by removing the obstacles that kept them from living full lives. They were to stand with those in pain and pray with and for those who were struggling. Jesus empowered them to *cure the sick, raise the dead, heal the leprous, and expel demons*. In other words, to make a difference in people's lives.

What difference does it make that you are a discipleship of Jesus Christ? That is perhaps the looming question before us this morning. Do you feel as though you have the power to do these things...cure the sick or raise the dead? Have you ever walked with a friend who was put her life back together after a divorce or the death of a spouse? Have you ever provided a safe place for a young person to ask questions without the threat of judgment or criticism? Then I believe you have helped to raise the dead. Have you prayed for someone who was sick or worried or struggling? Then perhaps you have in fact expelled a demon or two.

Instead of encouraging us in our discipleship, Jesus' instructions often send a wave of panic through us. I can't cure anyone, I can't raise the dead, I can't heal someone who is sick, and I certainly can't expel demons. What Jesus says today seems complicated, but it is in fact very simple. For example, when we invite people to participate in the healing services here at the church, we know we can not cure them. However, we do believe that God uses us to help heal that person. Healing, after all, is a process. There is spiritual healing, there is physical healing, and there is emotional healing. We hope that what we do helps to remove obstacles that keep them from living a full life. Do they harbor resentment or hold a grudge? Is there a broken relationship that needs to be mended or anger that needs to be released? Perhaps they are simply sick and tired of being sick and tired and welcome the opportunity to release that burden. This is what the healing ministry offers. We make a difference in people's lives simply by being present to them, allowing them to express themselves honestly and openly before God, and encircling them with a community of care.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by what Jesus expects of us. There are moments when the needs of the world and our ability to help seem grossly out of balance. We don't trust that the little we do truly makes a difference. We have acquired what one psychologist calls "learned helplessness;" the "I give up" response which believes nothing I do can make a difference. One preacher says, "'learned helplessness' is not just a reaction to momentary burnout, but a deeply entrenched pattern of responding to adversity. Seligman (the psychologist who coined the term) identifies three features of the 'learned helplessness' habit: it interprets every setback as *personal*, *permanent*, and *pervasive*. In other words, whenever anything goes wrong, an individual with the habit of helplessness concludes, 'it is all my fault, things are always going to be this way, this one problem is going to ruin everything.'"

Now you might think that only someone suffering from a form of mental illness like clinical depression might respond this way. However, many relatively healthy people succumb to this fatalistic way of thinking. I imagine when a real tragedy strikes it is all too easy to fall prey to this sense of pervasive helplessness. It is at those dark moments that we thank God for those quiet angels that arrive to help us to maneuver our way through the darkness. Whenever you have done this for someone, you have brought someone back to life and perhaps you didn't even know it.

We can overcome this learned helplessness by understanding three things. First, the difficulties we face may not be of our own creation. In a fallen world, tragedy comes to all of us. Part of what Mary Louise Bring calls “the victory over hopelessness” is to differentiate those elements of a situation which can be helped—elements for which we bear responsibility—from those which simply cannot be helped. This may be when the Serenity Prayer becomes a treasured gift. Perhaps it would help to hear this prayer in its entirety.

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him
Forever in the next.
Amen.

--*Reinhold Niebuhr* (1926)

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote this prayer in 1926. Even today, its core message remains timeless and universal. Most of us are familiar with the first part of the prayer, however many of us may never have heard the full text. This brief prayer is so powerful because it expresses so much comfort as well as so much appreciated grace. As I hear it again, God reminds me that I don't have the power to change everything, but I do have the power to discern that which I can change and that which I cannot. It is only when I am willing to submit to God's will and seek God's wisdom that I can make lasting change. In addition, I can experience a profound sense of peace when I acknowledge that I am

not perfect, but instead, frustratingly prone to sinful behavior and in spite of all that, God still loves me.

Some people spend a lot of time and energy being angry at the world for not living up to their lofty expectations. The serenity prayer reminds me to let go of those unreasonable expectations and instead seek the will of Christ in my life. It is amazing that so much power is encapsulated in so few verses. This simple prayer has changed millions of lives. Over and over again, God uses these words to *cure the sick, raise the dead, heal the leprous, and expel demons*.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul's words of encouragement help all disciples move beyond this sense of helplessness. They are both comforting and challenging. He says, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ^a ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ^b ^c ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ^d ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Romans 5: 1-5)

None of us wants to suffer. However, by the power of the Holy Spirit suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us. We will suffer, we will endure hardships, yet in and through it all there will always be a blessing. As Christ's disciples, we have what it takes to remove the obstacles that keep us from living full lives. We have the power to make a difference. The Holy Spirit sustains, transforms and empowers us for ministry. The Holy Spirit makes us strong, giving us what we need to face challenges head on. The Holy Spirit also gives us the courage and strength to listen for the will of God. In all these things, in all these ways we become faithful disciples, laborers in the vineyard, even conquerors of death. God will send to you a partner, someone with whom you will be sent to *cure the sick, raise the dead, heal the leprous, and expel demons*. Rejoice in this ministry that God has given you. Amen