

"Freely Given, Freely Give"

Matthew 9:35 - 10:8

Proper 6

I. The Savior Sends

It's no wonder the crowds gather: they've heard about Jesus. He's going from town to town, city to village. He's preaching about the Kingdom of God. He's healing every sickness and disease that confronts Him: there's not a single manifestation of sin that even comes close to challenging Him. The stories of the miracles spread, as does the Gospel of the kingdom, and the people flock to Jesus, sheep in need of a shepherd. So, the Lord has compassion on them, as they are weary and scattered, sick and heavily-burdened. In fact, He desires that all be healed, relieved, forgiven and gathered. Thus, He says to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest" (Mt. 9:38).

There's little doubt that the disciples add their "amen" to this prayer; indeed, Lord, let it be so. It is then that the Lord uses them as an answer to that prayer. He calls the twelve to Himself. He gives them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease. Then He sends them out, saying, "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give" (Mt. 10:5-8).

Jesus could have done this so many other ways. He could have sent out legions of angels to declare this message of His kingdom. He could have used a voice from heaven for all to hear at the same time. He could just have written the message in everyone's heart. He could have sat in the temple and summoned all nations to Himself. He could do whatever He wants: He's the Son of God. But instead, He picks twelve men to go and tell.

They go, and they go knowing two things: they've been given a message, and they've been sent to deliver it. They're not making up the message as they go along, but they go to proclaim the message that has been freely given to them. Likewise, they're not going to perform wonders and healings out of their own closet of miraculous powers: they have none. Instead, they're going to work wonders because Jesus has given them authority to do so. They're not even going to go on their own, but they're going to go because they've been sent. Freely all this has been given to them. Now they may go and freely give.

So, they go, and imagine the crowds that gather. Maybe there is disappointment. After, all they want to see the Savior, but they get the understudies instead. Perhaps some leave disappointed or disgusted before the disciples even open their mouths. Perhaps they feel like Jesus has let them down by not coming personally, or because the student is never better than the master. Those are typical human reactions, but humans are typically wrong with the things of God. The Lord is not unfaithful. This is His way of doing things. When the disciples heal the sick, the sick are healed. When they cleanse the lepers, the lepers are cleansed. When they raise the dead, the dead are raised. When they cast out demons, demons flee.

Why? Because it's not them doing it. Thaddaeus isn't saying to the sick, "In the name of Thaddaeus, be healed." Bartholomew isn't saying, "In the name of Bart, come out of them." Demons aren't afraid of Bartholomew. But they are afraid of Jesus, and the disciples are doing these things in Jesus' name. He's sent them; and by His Word, He is there with them, too. When they preach, "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand," it's true because the King is there by His authority and Word. And that means this, too: that when the disciples tell the people that their sins are forgiven, their sins are forgiven. Not because the disciples are forgiving them, but because Jesus is. That's what He sent them to do. That's what He gave them to do. Freely they have received. Now they freely give.

2. The Mission Continues

Weary pastors take great comfort from the story of Balaam in Numbers 22. In that account King Balak sends the prophet Balaam to curse the people of Israel. However, as Balaam rides his donkey toward the people, God opens the mouth of his donkey and the donkey talks. The donkey speaks to rebuke the prophet Balaam.

Now, why would pastors like that story? The comfort goes like this: "If God can speak through Balaam's donkey, then He can speak through me, too."

Beyond the laugh, there's an important point. In His wisdom, with a world full of lost and wandering sheep, God has chosen to spread His kingdom by having sinful human beings speak His Word. He calls pastors in the Holy Ministry to preach that Word publicly, on behalf of His Church; and a group of men with greater idiosyncrasies would be difficult to find. Despite the quirks and personality failings, however, the Lord still uses them as His instruments. Not just them, though: every Christian, tempted by sin and exhibiting all sorts of weaknesses, has the privilege of telling that Word about Jesus to others. That is how the kingdom of God spreads.

Why? Because it's not the people. It's the Word. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is present by His Word: the kingdom of heaven is at hand because the King is at hand. The same Savior who went to the cross to die for the sins of the world, now comes in His Word to give that forgiveness to individual people—to you and me and all who hear. Jesus is present where His Word is. Add that Word to water, of course, and He's there in Baptism. Add that Word to bread and wine, and He's present in His Supper.

It's the Word that's powerful—not the person speaking it. It's the same Word with the same power that heals the sick, cleanses the leper and casts out demons in the Lord's time. By that Word, Jesus comes to give forgiveness and faith and life, to turn wandering sinners into the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand. It's that simple.

Of course, even though the Lord is faithful, sinners are not known for the same; so, we need to warn of the dangers that man usually falls prey to as he messes up this gift of God.

The first danger is the idea that the power of the Word depends on the charisma of the preacher. If the preacher's style is engaging and holds interest, then the Word is powerful stuff. If he has an off Sunday or he's just dry as dust, then the Word isn't so powerful. If this is true, that means that God is only as faithful and powerful as the sinful man who is preaching the sermon. It means that God's power varies upon how much sleep the pastor got the night before. This is an extremely seductive

temptation in our culture and society, because image is emphasized so much. People judge books by covers, and companies spend millions of dollars to make sure that their products have the right packaging and an exciting ad campaign. (Is a product really better because a popular celebrity claims to use it? Does beer really taste better if there are more beautiful women in the commercial?) We are easily conditioned to judge the quality of all things by how well they hold our attention without our even trying to concentrate. Old Adam makes sure that it's extremely easy to judge the Word by the same criteria. Pastors can suffer this temptation, too, believing that their personality or style make the Word more effective. It's simply not true. However, repent and rejoice! The Word's power is not bound by the personality of the speaker. Where the Word is, Jesus is. Where Jesus is, there is forgiveness and life.

The next danger is the idea that the power of the Word depends on the ordination of the preacher. If the one who speaks the Word is ordained, then it's God's powerful Word. If a layman shares the Word with someone, it's just information but nothing more, like a recipe or a news broadcast. It tells about salvation, but it doesn't save. If this is true, then God's plan of salvation is limited by the office of the man. This one isn't quite as popular, but it's always lurking around somewhere.

The third danger is the lazy Old Adam's notion that the speaking of the Word is best left to professionals. Christians meet and spend time with all sorts of people on a daily basis whom the pastor will never meet, and each believer has the joy of telling of the hope they have in Christ. However, many balk at the thought of doing so.

The reasons given might be one thing or another. "I don't know what to say," is one, although this raises some law-accusing questions: why not? With Bibles to read and sermons to hear and classes to attend, what prevents you from not knowing? Simply tell other people about Jesus—about His ministry and miracles, His death on the cross and resurrection; about forgiveness and the hope of eternal life.

"Oh, but I'm not a very good speaker." Neither were Moses or Paul, and I suspect that Balaam's donkey wasn't usually eloquent either; yet God used each of them.

"People won't listen to me." Careful, now; because now you're saying that the power of the Word depends on you, not on Christ. Furthermore, I can assure you that people don't listen to pastors more than others. After all, it's the Word—not the person who speaks it. "I don't like talking to strangers." That's okay. I'm not real big on cold-calls door-to-door anyway. Talk about Jesus to each other. To your kids. Your grandkids. A good friend who's curious about your faith. The Lord will provide opportunities.

That's how the Lord spreads His kingdom on earth: He sends out His Word. He gives His people, you and me, the privilege of telling it to others. He gives us the honor, despite our sins and weaknesses, of being His instruments to tell others of Jesus; and He promises that His Word will not return to Him void, but will accomplish what He sends it forth to do. Where people listen to us and rejoice with us, we give thanks and glory to God. Where people reject the Gospel we proclaim, we remember that people rejected Jesus, too, and we give thanks that He counts us worthy to suffer for His name's sake.

But as you speak His Word, rejoice most of all in this: Jesus first speaks it to you. Freely you have received; only then do you freely give. Your salvation this day is not based upon how well you evangelize, how many people you tell about Jesus, or how well you tell the story. Your salvation is already yours because Jesus has already died on the cross to save you. By the mouths of people in your life—parents, pastors, friends, and others—the Lord has told you of forgiveness; and in telling you, gives it to you.

So, it is this day, as we gather here. We gather here to hear God's saving Word. As the Gospel is spoken, it speaks and delivers forgiveness. So on this day you rejoice: you have not just heard about forgiveness today. But by that Word, you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.