

Commentary to the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Jesus summons the Twelve and sends them out two by two. He gives them power over unclean spirits, and instructs them to take nothing for their journey but a walking stick. He warns them about rejection: people will not always welcome them or listen to them. The disciples go out and preach repentance, drive out many demons, anoint the sick with oil and cure them. Note that the English word "repentance" does not adequately convey the meaning of the Greek verb that Mark uses in his gospel (literally "to change the mind). In Mark's usage the word implies a prophetic call to interpret reality in a radically new way, as from blindness to sight. "Repentance" is at once a gift and the task of turning and surrendering to God in a way that embraces every aspect of life. A New Testament example of the reality to which the word points is the conversion experience of Paul. For Paul, that radical change of direction means to live with the mind and heart of Christ (1 Corinthians 2: 6-16).

Life Implications If you visualize Mark's dramatization of one of the most theologically significant events in his entire gospel, its comic character may strike you. It's a scene right out of the musical *Godspell*. Here is Jesus sending out these disciples (not the best and brightest of that society) on a mission to overthrow the reign of Satan and to proclaim the coming of God's reign. The comic aspect, if not for the disciples at least for the onlookers, is apparent when the size of the mission is juxtaposed with the means to accomplish it. The disciples, whose obtuseness and little faith Mark frequently highlights, now are instructed to go out with nothing but a walking stick?no food, no sack, no money in their belts, not even a bible.

Mark, in telling us about the beginning of the church in so dramatic a fashion, wants to be certain that disciples in his church and in our church will be mindful of some important implications. We, like the first disciples, are inadequate for the task; yet Christ's mission for God's kingdom is given to us. The

comic contrast of mission and means may point to something essential about the church. If we labor under the illusion that we can bring about God's reign by our own resources, perhaps even replacing the walking stick with a sword, we will be advancing something other than God's kingdom on earth. Paul refers to his experience of preaching the gospel not as comic, but as foolishness (1 Corinthians 1: 18-31). He relishes saying "we are fools for Christ's sake" because he understands that it is because of his weakness that the power of Christ can dwell in him (1 Corinthians 4: 10 and 2 Corinthians 12: 9). Perhaps we in the United States, who have so many of the world's resources, might reflect on the reality that in terms of accomplishing Christ's mission, all our high-tech resources should be regarded as no more than a walking stick.

At the beginning of Mark's gospel we learn that the Spirit descended upon Jesus, God's beloved Son, at his baptism by John in the Jordan. In this awareness and by the power of the Spirit, Jesus overcomes the power of Satan in the wilderness; and after John's arrest he sets out to accomplish his mission for God's kingdom.

He preaches repentance, casts out unclean spirits, and cures many who are ill. By the time Mark wrote his gospel, the connection between Jesus' mission and the extension of his mission to the church was quite clear. Because disciples share the Spirit and are beloved by the Father, they also share Christ's power to preach repentance, to drive out demons, and to cure the sick.

This gospel of the Lord's commissioning disciples to carry forward his mission may remind us of our inadequacy, but paradoxically it also reminds us of our dignity and importance. God depends not only on Jesus in his humanity, but on the successors of the Twelve and on each of us to be co-creators and co-christs in bringing about a kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

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