

"You Want Me To Do What?"  
a sermon by Rev Sue Strachan based on Matthew 9:35-10:8  
Wolcott Congregational Church  
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Bible commentator Alexander Wimberly comments on our scripture this way, "Jesus makes it look easy. He goes to all the cities, preaches in all the synagogues, and cures every single ailment. No distance is too great, no audience too skeptical, no disease too severe. Jesus gets it done." That is Good News. But then, Jesus decides to give others the authority and the commission to go out and do all those same things. And, the tense of the verb in the Greek indicates that what Jesus is asking is an on-going action, something that is continuous once set in motion. That's where we come in, for Jesus continues to ask his disciples, you and me to do simple things like: cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons and don't forget to proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. So, be sure to put these five things on your "to do" list when you get home today.

No wonder the "harvest is plentiful and the workers few," who would want the job? Our passage stopped before we heard all the 'job benefits' listed in the next two paragraphs. Great things like, there is no pay, you will have to survive off the goodness of others. You will be sent out like sheep among wolves, and you will probably be flogged, handed over to authorities, and hated by everyone, but "not to worry," Jesus says, "my Father's Spirit will be speaking through you... "And if you endure to the end, you will be saved." Great. But, who are we to argue with Jesus? He was living proof to his disciples that all these things can be done and all can be endured. They had "seen a thing or two" in their time together; and Jesus always had them covered.

So, what about our 'to do' list? We are to proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. In other words, we need to always live up to our church's nickname "a little bit of heaven on the Green." Our words must match our deeds and vice versa. We have and can experience the nearness of God in our own lives, in our own backyard, in our own faith journeys. Will we also share what we have experienced of God's nearness with those around? Who is willing to take the risk in today's culture? And yet, if we don't do it, who will? Some of you have shared with me the surprise of having co-workers approach you when in need of some encouragement. They have recognized something in you that is comforting, helpful to them. They might even start the conversation, "You believe in God, right?" Let's stay alert to opportunities that arise to share what we have, what we know, and our faith in the One we trust with life itself. As the rest of the lesson goes on to say, some will hear and others won't. But, if you and I make no response at all and shy away from letting others know we are persons of faith, no one will hear of the goodness, mercy and love of God that we know so well through Jesus Christ.

Next on the list is "casting out demons." What are our modern-day demons? I have my list – negativity, despair, worry, false pride, rage, hate, apathy, lack of self-worth, jealousy, greed, revenge. The list is long. I call these demons because we allow each of these to gain and hold power over us, we give them the power they need to infect our well-being, our self-control, and our ability to freely live life to the fullest. Casting out demons is hard work in ourselves, let alone finding ways to help someone else. What tools do we have in this fight? First, is prayer. When asked why the disciples were unsuccessful in casting out a demon, Jesus said it was because prayer was required. Prayer is calling on the only power that is true, right and good; the only power that can get rid of the demon and fill the void after. It is not by accident that calling on a higher power

is the first step of all 12 step programs. As disciples in our world today, we are the ones who know where power lies; it is in the Spirit of Christ at work among, within, and around us. Sometimes we must encourage others to fight the demons within themselves. Other times it is wiser to encourage a person to give up the fight begin to rely on the one to whom we pray, "Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil." If not, we give power to the demons that do not have to even exist. Let God take over the battle.

Two down. Let's move on to "cleansing the lepers." The key to this one is understanding who the lepers are in our world. There are many we consider to be "unclean," the outcasts, those persons who have been forced to the margins of society and life itself – no voice, no help, no place to turn. Although some of those we might consider 'unclean' need physical cleansing, most are more in need of having the stigma of whatever label has been placed on them removed. Cleansing can come in the form of giving someone a second chance and opening a door that had been closed; loving a person enough to risk offering a place in your life and in your world. Some of our modern-day lepers include: veterans who have not been able to gain re-entry into society; those persons who have paid their debt, done the jail time and now find no way to move forward again; persons, young and old, with differing abilities who are treated as though their disability is contagious; single parents with a number of young children judged for their inability to provide; this list also is long. We can and we must be there; to be advocates and friends to those our scripture called "the harassed and helpless."

Which brings us to the "raising the dead." I believe this one comes as the result of the last one. When the prodigal son returned home to his father, was accepted back into his love, the father told the older, less forgiving son, "We have to rejoice. Your brother was lost and is found, was dead and is now alive." Forgiveness is the door to life. Anger, resentment, revenge, judgment are lethal weapons aimed at others. When we withhold our love or attach strings to it, the "other" is as good as dead. If you have ever known forgiveness in your life, you also know how essential, freeing and life giving it is.

Now for the one which seems the easiest: "Cure the sick." This one, we have been working on for a very long time and amazing strides have been made. I can show you the scar on my arm from my small pox vaccination; pictures of my sister in an iron lung due to polio; tell of the number of times my fever spiked with measles and rubella. In my life time, small pox has been eradicated, polio almost gone, and vaccinations now prevent so many other diseases it is only matter of time. The stories of cancer survivors are powerful and more and more are living to tell their stories. Cures for physical ailments seem to be coming more readily than cures for other, more hidden sicknesses – sickness of heart, spirit, soul which destroy a person way before the body finally gives up. We have a defense against these ailments, too – compassion. Other than prayer, which is where everything starts, it was and is the compassion of Christ which saved us and made all the difference. Compassion means to suffer with and to show mercy by giving aid and support.

This is who we are as disciples turned apostles of Christ sent out into the world. We are called and equipped to do the work of compassion Jesus set before us. The laborers are few, but we are mighty, mightily blessed by our Creator God, Compassionate Savior, and the Holy Spirit who gives all the power we need (as the Apostle Paul wrote) "to accomplish more than we could ever ask or even begin to imagine." Let's get to work and get it done as Jesus did. Amen.