

Year A, Proper 6
Matthew 9:35 – 10:8
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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The Rev. John Spicer

Go and Proclaim the Reign of God

As you may know, eight of us – four young people and four adults – spent the first week in June on a mission trip to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, helping with recovery from Hurricane Katrina. Along with 130 other people, we stayed in a camp at Christ Episcopal Church in Bay St. Louis, which you would recognize from newscasts in the days immediately following Katrina. The church sits only yards from the beach, and it was almost completely washed away by 30 feet of ocean. All that remained was a steeple and a foundation – but they celebrated the Eucharist there three days after the storm, testifying to God's presence, no matter what.

We didn't know what we'd be doing on this trip. As it turned out, we cleared overgrown lots, and stripped insulation from a crawlspace, and cleaned an elderly woman's house, and hauled away lots of debris. Apart from one blessed day of interior painting, we were in the Mississippi sun all day – but we did get to swim in the ocean afterward.

It's good to reflect for a moment on why we were taking young people on a "mission trip" in the first place. Why do we call it that? We could have called it a "volunteer trip" or a "service trip" – after all, we went down there to help people, right? That's true, but there's more to it than that.

As it happens, probably not coincidentally, Jesus has something to say to us this morning that helps us understand what was going on with this trip to Mississippi. Over the past two chapters of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus been healing all kinds of people as something of a preview of coming attractions – an in-breaking of the Kingdom, a glimpse of what it looks like to live under the rule and authority of God. Then, in today's reading, he sees the crowds before him – all the people still needing healing, still needing to have the good news of God's reign revealed to them. The sight must have been overwhelming. So he tells his disciples to pray that God would send out "laborers" into this "harvest" to bring these folks into God's Kingdom, too. That sounds safe enough – asking God to find somebody to do this hard and holy work, somebody other than me.

But then Jesus makes the connection between prayer and action, and it's a connection he wants all of us disciples to understand. He summons the 12, who are named specifically so that we can't miss the fact that these are particular, normal people receiving this call, not apostolic superheroes with special powers we don't have. And finally, Jesus gives them the specifics of their call. "Go," he says. "Go to the lost sheep." Go to places you don't know very well, to people you haven't met before, to people who *aren't* just like you, to people who don't have their lives put together. And "as you go," he says "proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." (Matthew 10:5-8) Make them see that God's rule in the world is *not* just a nice idea but a living, breathing reality, embodied by you.

What makes this a mission trip, both for the 12 apostles and for us today, is the fact of being sent somewhere. Mission is usually about helping; but it's always about going somewhere beyond your own world and revealing the reality of the Kingdom of God. I'd like to share with

you a moment from our trip last week when we became apostles, people sent to others to fulfill God's mission of bringing the Kingdom to life in the here and now.

For two of our days in Mississippi, our group was sent to the home of an older woman named Eileen, who still lives in a FEMA trailer three years after Katrina. This was not simply a random assignment. Apparently, Eileen was one of the people who received a quilt made by St. Andrew's quilting group, and she wanted to meet people from the place that had given her that token of God's love.

There was a lot for our group to do in Eileen's yard. It doesn't take long for land down there to revert from the Edens we create to the nearly tropical jungle that coastal Mississippi becomes, left to its own devices. I would have given a lot for a machete that day, rather than trying to use a weed-eater to subdue vines that just twisted right along with the machine's head, or thorny plants that choked the machine into submission. But we tried to restore a sense of Eden to a place being overtaken by chaos. We mowed, and cut, and carried off trash, and chopped down small trees, and tried to make Eileen's overgrown lot look like someone cared for it. She just wanted to be able to see the flowers that her mother had planted along the back fence.

Eileen also needed some caring herself. She had a stroke 10 years ago that left her partially paralyzed on one side. Then came Katrina, leaving her home under 10 feet of sea water. This was not just her house but her *home* – her mother and father had built it, and she had lived there for years. But in a moment, she lost everything other than the two nights' change of clothes she had taken with her to her son's house in Baton Rouge. Her house, her car, her furniture, her clothes, her photos, a lifetime of precious things ... everything was gone. Tragically, like most of the people there, she did not have flood insurance. "Everyone told us we didn't need it," she said. So the grand total of her settlement with the insurance company was \$8,000 – \$8,000 after losing everything.

But that's not all. To add illness to injury and insult, Eileen also has been struggling with cancer in the years following Katrina. She was a week and a half past surgery the day we came to her trailer. And despite the fact that she had lost everything, was sick and disabled, and couldn't work, she somehow had slipped through the cracks of the system and had never even talked with a case manager to guide her to the help she needed. The people from FEMA had told her she needed to get out of her trailer and into some kind of normal housing, but she had no idea how to go about making that transition. Eileen's story is sadly common: On one lot, you find people who have gotten good settlements and rebuilt homes up to the new hurricane codes; on the next lot, you find people lost on the margins because they don't have money or a good advocate to help them navigate the system. They are the "least of these" in this time and place.

And yet, Eileen was kind and gracious to us. She brought out ice-cream sandwiches for the kids laboring in the sun. She and I also talked for a while in her trailer. She told stories that sounded like something from another world: Railroad ties ripped out of the tracks and driven through her living-room wall; houses lifted off their foundations and deposited hundreds of yards away; people stuck at the tops of trees, waiting to be rescued from the water; bodies hanging from the trees once the water receded. Then she brought out a little photo album of her own personal devastation – pictures of her home's interior caked with mud; her furniture tossed about like a child's doll house; her ruined home being bulldozed. Going through that photo album was a little surreal because it felt very much like the way people offer to show you pictures of their grandchildren. She *did* want to show us pictures of her grandchildren, too – but only after the Katrina photos. She still needs to talk about the storm and its devastation, and I imagine it's hard

to find people around there who can listen, given that they're each grieving their own Katrina tragedies.

It was very tempting, in that moment, to feel like all that our group had been doing – all that anyone who came to help could possibly do – was to tidy up a small corner of an overwhelming mess. I mean, we had cleared and cleaned up a lot that would probably be overgrown again in a matter of weeks. More helpfully for the long term, Rachel Chambers, our youth director, had found the contact information Eileen needed to get herself a case manager and start making her way through the red tape of getting into a better home. But still, our effort felt small and insignificant compared with the suffering around us, and I said that to Eileen.

But she said, “No, that’s just not true. To me, y’all have made all the difference in the world. You’ve done things for me that I could never do myself.” She could see us and our presence there as a piece of a larger story of hope – *God’s* story of hope. As she showed me her pictures, she concluded her account of devastation and illness with this proclamation of the Kingdom: “You know,” she said, “God has always been there for me. God’s the one who’s gotten me through all this.”

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“Go,” Jesus said, “and proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Indeed, for us and for Eileen, the Kingdom *was* right there, in the yard outside a FEMA trailer. She still had no money. She would still have to endure another storm of red tape to get better housing. And of course, those weeds and thorns would grow back quickly in the Mississippi sun, threatening to subdue Eden once again. But still, the Kingdom of God had been revealed and proclaimed there. Eileen could see she was not alone in her trauma from the storm, in her frustration with people who were supposed to be helping her, in her suffering from strokes and cancer. And we – eight particular individuals sweating buckets and burning in the sun – the eight of us had been sent specifically to her that day to be part of making the Kingdom a reality. We had been sent by God. We were missionaries.

And so are you. Every person in this room, every member of this faith community *not* in this room, every last one of us Christians is a missionary, because we are each sent *somewhere*. Our task – *your* task – is to listen well enough to hear God tell you where you’re being sent. The eight of us on this trip were willing to take the risk to be sent to a place we’d never seen and minister to people we’d never met. What kind of risk is God calling *you* to take? Maybe to serve dinner and play with the kids at Freedom Fire on Friday. Maybe to serve a meal at the Kansas City Community Kitchen. Maybe to help at Friendship House in September, sorting clothes for abused women and children. Maybe to join us for a workday on a Habitat for Humanity house in November. Maybe to volunteer at Gordon Parks Elementary School. Maybe to visit lonely people at a nursing home. Maybe to cross a more distant boundary and come to Haiti in January.

The question is not “Would God actually send *me* on a mission?” The answer to that is absolutely, “Yes.” The only questions are whether we will listen to discern where God is sending us, and whether we will take the risk to go where God asks us to go.