

Sent by God

By Linda Rex

July 3, 2022, PROPER 9—This August I will be celebrating ten years from the day I first became a senior pastor here in Tennessee. It's hard for me to believe it's been that long since I first felt sure that this was where I was being sent by God to live and do pastoral ministry.

Over the years, between my studies with Grace Communion Seminary and my own personal reading and learning, I have come to see how being sent by God is not something unique to pastors or preachers. Indeed, it is clear from the Biblical record that Jesus calls all of his followers to be on mission with him. We are each sent by Christ, just as Jesus was sent by his Father. It is a privilege to participate in what God is doing in this world, and every one of us is invited to be a part of it.

What this may look like for each of us is unique. We are each created differently, with unique talents, abilities, and educations, as well as spiritual giftings. Not everyone is as gifted in one way as in others, but we all share by the Spirit in Christ's perfections, and we have a greater capacity to love and serve others than we often realize. So often, our ability to serve others and participate in what God is doing in this world is limited more by our resistance to the Spirit, and his will and purposes, than it is by our own personal inability to do something.

And many times, the Spirit desires to work through us to reveal Christ in and through us in service to others, but we exclude people from those we are willing to be in relationship with or are willing to help. The apostle Paul says in Galatians 6:10, "while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith." How often we are happy to do good to "those who are of the household of the faith", but we are unwilling to do good to "all people", especially if they happen to be a part of a group of people who we believe are "bad" people.

I was reminded of this last night in a meeting I was attending—how too often we restrict our attention to those around us within the body of Christ while not attending to those in the community around us, wherever we live and work and play. There were times I witnessed, and am embarrassed to say, at times caught myself giving these subtle comments and cues to visitors to our church which made the statement "you're not included" while on the wall of our downstairs in big letters hung the words "you're included". Sometimes what we know in our heads has not quite reached our hearts and this becomes evident in the way we speak and act towards others.

In our gospel passage for today, we see Jesus sending out a group of his followers. They are equipped with the good news of the presence of the kingdom of God and the power to heal, are told to travel lightly and rapidly, and are sent out ahead of Jesus. As he instructed them for this journey, the Lord told them that whoever rejected them would be rejecting Jesus himself—and whoever rejected Jesus, rejected the Father.

There is a divine oneness in the ministry in which Jesus includes us. We can be encouraged by Jesus' words as he sent his disciples out, that all authority in heaven and on earth is his. We have the resources of heaven at our disposal as we share the good news of God's love and of the establishment of his kingdom here on earth in and through Jesus Christ. The kingdom, already present in Jesus by the Spirit, will one day come in fulness, and all the mess we've made of earth will be made right when he returns in glory.

Meanwhile, we live in the midst of a generation crying out to know the truth about who we are and why things are the way they are. We ourselves often struggle with these same questions. And God speaks to us by his Spirit in many ways, reminding us that we are his very own, we are beloved, accepted and forgiven, and we don't always live like that is true. We experience constantly the consequences of doing things our own way, of trying to save ourselves or fix things our way, and ending up in places that are excruciatingly difficult and sometimes even deadly.

As human beings, we have been created for relationship. We each have the capacity to live in interconnected ways with other human beings. Even if we are introverts, we still can build friendships and learn to interact with other people in healthy ways. Perhaps we need to spend more effort tearing down walls rather than building them. We might need to challenge ourselves to have conversations with people we don't know very well. Maybe this means we need to learn some new life skills or intentionally join a small group of people whose interests we share so we can break through our isolation and get into relationship with others.

If we are a little braver, perhaps we can be the one who provides the space and resources for a small group to gather for food and fellowship. Or perhaps we might get with another friend and start a book club at the local library, or start an art group at a local community center. Or we might join a community service group who is actively involved in making life better for others. There are many ways where we can begin to build relationships with persons we wouldn't normally interact with who do not go to church with us.

In all these ways, we create space for the Spirit to work in people's lives, and to provide opportunities for spiritual conversations. By building relationships, not for the sake of converting people, but for the sake of the relationship itself, we draw people with us into our fellowship with our God who always lives in loving relationship as Father, Son, and Spirit. This is the essence of living as being sent by God, sharing the good news of the Father's love expressed to us in Jesus and poured out on us by the Holy Spirit. May we be diligent to do as Jesus has asked and share the good news with others in tangible ways. And may we trust that he will take our feeble efforts and bless them so bountifully, we will respond with great delight and thanksgiving.

Heavenly Father, forgive us for isolating ourselves and for separating ourselves from others who are meant to be a part of our life. Grant us the grace to stretch beyond our inner walls and to make room for others, to build genuine healthy relationships with those around us which you can use to draw people to yourself, through Jesus and by your Spirit. Amen.

"Shout joyfully to God, all the earth; sing the glory of His name; make His praise glorious. Say to God, 'How awesome are Your works! ... All the earth will worship You, and will sing praises to You; they will sing praises to Your name.' Selah." Psalm 66:1-4 (5-9) NASB

"Now after this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them in pairs ahead of Him to every city and place where He Himself was going to come. And He was saying to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. Go; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no money belt, no bag, no shoes; and greet no one on the way. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace be to this house." If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking what they give you; for the laborer is worthy of his wages. Do not keep moving from house to house. Whatever city you enter and they receive you, eat what is set before you; and heal those in it who are sick, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." But whatever city you enter and they do not receive you, go out into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your city which clings to our feet we wipe off in protest against you; yet be sure of this, that the kingdom of God has come near." The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me.' The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.' And He said to them, 'I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.'" Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 NASB