

MULTIPLY THE EFFORT

TEXT: LUKE 10:1-9

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on May 15, 2022

We're still working with the Easter project of turning death into life. It's God's job and we're called to help, which is the point of emphasis for this week. On Easter night, Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to his inner circle of disciples and transferred responsibility for his work to them. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," he told them. And, just like that, the disciples (the ones who were learning) graduated to become apostles, the ones being sent out into the world to continue God's work of turning death into life.

Last week we looked at that resurrection process as concentric circles, with the center circle being the ability to embrace death, and the next one out the ability embody service by adopting the mind of Christ. This week we add the outer ring of the circle with the need to multiply the effort which ensures that all the sacrifices we've made with those first two things have a chance to make a difference that will last. To multiply the effort turns a gift into a legacy and a single act of kindness or liberation into a movement.

The main biblical point to note here is that Jesus could only turn over the job to his disciples at the end because he had already recruited them three years earlier and had been training and preparing them for this very moment. And while we tend to think of only those twelve who he first recruited as being disciples, there were many, many others that were listening and learning along the way. I picked the passage from Luke that Kim just read specifically to point that out.

At the start of Luke chapter 9, Jesus sends the twelve out on a mission, not just to proclaim that God is drawing near to them but also to heal the sick. Which they do; without Jesus with them. At the end of chapter 9, we learn about additional disciple wannabe's who don't make the cut because they are only half-hearted and aren't willing to make the sacrifices needed to do the work. But at the start of chapter 10, we learn that there are still plenty who are willing to do what it takes—enough that Jesus is able to handpick 72 of them (that's 72 in addition to the original 12) and put them to work.

Like the job of the 12 at the start of chapter 9, the job of the 72 is two-fold. First, they are to scout out a town to find people and places that will host Jesus and his entourage when they arrive. And second, they are to cure any sick people they find in those places. The job they are given is not really much different than the job given to the 12. It's preparation for Jesus' arrival on the one hand, and practice for carrying forward his work once he's gone on the other.

That kind of multiplication of effort is how you move from a single event to a movement. Any individual act of service and sacrifice can help the greater good. And on occasion those actions intersect with someone who is so affected by them that they become the next Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, Jr. Any bit of kindness and love injected into the world helps, no matter how small it may seem in the moment; and we never know where the ripples from that might lead.

But it's also true that Jesus did not just run around and do good deeds; suffer, die, and rise again; and hope that someone would notice and do something meaningful with it. From the very start of his ministry, Jesus planned for a movement that would help the biblical vision of peace, joy, and blessing be made manifest on this earth. He recruited twelve people to start and then kept right on recruiting along the way. He also vetted them; not by standards of wealth, education, or status, but by their own willingness to embrace death and embody service. The call to every one of his disciples was to stop what they were doing, give it all up, and follow him. And while we understandably focus on the ones who actually did that, there are plenty of stories in the gospels of those who were not willing. Sometimes he presented those examples in the form of parables and sometimes we are just told about encounters he has in his travels.

At the end of Luke 9, Jesus is reminding those who are caught up in his celebrity that this isn't a fan club. He points out that those who travel with him are homeless, and that those who have second thoughts because of what they might be leaving behind aren't yet ready to join him. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell the story of a rich young ruler who Jesus meets. Jesus is clearly pleased with his commitment and enthusiasm so he issues the same call the first twelve disciples responded to: Leave it all and follow me. But the young man can't. His money is his stumbling block. He can't get rid of his possessions and wealth and he leaves Jesus with sadness.

I imagine Jesus was sad, too. But Jesus didn't go running after him and modify the deal to get him to stay. Jesus was not interested in his follower count or how many likes his parables got on Facebook. He knew what it would take to do the job. He told his followers to carefully count the cost before signing up for discipleship. If they couldn't embrace death and fully embody service in the first instance; he knew they wouldn't be able to hold up in the last. As we know, even some of those who did do it in the beginning got tripped up in the end—Judas being the tragic example here.

Taking that to a practical level, what this means for us as a local church body is that we will have a lasting impact only by the luck of the draw unless we are intentional about multiplying our efforts in the ways and for the reasons that Jesus did—to help God's vision of the beloved community become a reality in this world; to accept the calling to help turn this world of spiraling decay and systemic death into a garden brimming with life, health, and peace for all. The same is true on the smaller level of particular ministries within the church. And then those particular ministries rely on the individuals who lead and maintain them. Those people and ministries will change over time as we adapt to the changing landscape. But the need to multiply the effort in order to ensure the impact for the greater good remains, even as the particulars come and go.

So I want to turn to one of the questions we talked about at our discussion tables a few weeks ago: What are the obstacles to multiplying the effort? What makes it difficult for us to work in teams and prepare a line of succession? No doubt there are more than this, but I've identified three things that hinder us; and I suspect almost all of you have seen one or more of these things at work in various settings.

The first two things are pretty straightforward, even though they may be challenging for an organization to resolve. Thing number one is that the person doing something simply wants to do it by themselves. Sometimes that is driven by various neurotic tendencies—we need to be the hero or need to be needed; we refuse to admit that we need help or are too devoted to having the job done perfectly. Sometimes it's a selfish motive. We really like doing something, and don't want to share or give it up when it's time to pass the torch.

An even bigger reason that we often want to do something alone is that it's easier, faster, and often both. Boy, howdy, do I understand that one! Many hands do make light work; but many hands require coordination and usually some kind of training or instruction, which takes time. And to get those many hands to keep helping means working to create an atmosphere that lets every one of them enjoy the experience, avoid burnout, and come away feeling like they've made a meaningful contribution to a larger goal. It's often much, much easier to just do a thing ourselves; but in the long run it stifles growth of the ministry, the church, and deprives people of fellowship and opportunities to experience the joys of service.

That's the first obstacle to multiplying the effort: We'd rather do it ourselves. The second one is also easy to grasp, but not necessarily to solve. The job requires unavailable resources, either human or financial. In some cases, the un-resourced ministry is in the category of nice, but not necessary. But it's a real problem if what we need is mission critical and either absent or in short supply.

The third obstacle to multiplying our efforts is the most complex and multi-faceted: Even when additional help is wanted and the financial and human resources are present, those who could do it are unwilling. The reasons for that are legion and often exist in combination. I'll tick off just a few: 1. People are busy with things that have a higher priority in their lives. 2. A bad experience with the church or a particular leader has left them unwilling to re-engage. 3. The planning for the work is poor, non-existent, or not well-communicated, leaving people too uninspired to join in. 4. The work is expecting too much of too few and needs to be broken down into smaller chunks. 5. The ministry isn't viewed as meaningful or relevant to the larger mission. I'm sure you could name a dozen more.

People have not fundamentally changed since Jesus' day. All the reasons people gave for not accepting Jesus' invitation to join in his mission then are essentially the same reasons that people give now. There are things related to our status and comfort that we can't bring ourselves to give up. We can't embrace those deaths. We have conflicting priorities, making us able to serve as a leisure activity when other things are taken care of; but not to completely embody service with the mind of Christ. And those things compound to make multiplying the effort too difficult, unpleasant, or counterproductive.

The interplay of the three things we've explored is needed if we are to be of service to God in turning death into life. Just one or even two together can't do it in any kind of sustained manner. But there is good news. It's possible to spot the problems before it's too late. We've looked at these things as concentric circles with embrace death at the center, embody service as the next ring out, and the outer ring being multiply the effort. The place where difficulties in any of the circles will first become evident is in the outer layer.

The root problems may be much further in; but the decay becomes visible when teamwork is struggling or non-existent. When there is apathy about the work and no one is willing to step up; when ministries are run by individuals and not teams. Too many churches see dwindling engagement and point fingers outward. For several decades now we have preferred to blame low church engagement on Sunday morning sports programs.

I think that's a deflection from asking ourselves the hard question of why the church has been unable to communicate the basic human need for spiritual connection and transcendence. Or why the church has not been able to adapt to a changing culture. Why are we insisting that you can't be Christian if you don't show up, in person, for only one particular hour on one particular day each week? If we believe faith and spirituality are critical to human thriving, why have we built such heavy walls around where, when, and how people are allowed to engage those things?

We criticize church rituals and believe too much ritual is somehow the problem. It's too esoteric; people don't connect to it. We say that with a straight face when people at football games are painting their entire bodies in the color of their teams, coordinating body waves across stadiums filled with tens of thousands of people, and fracturing society over the correct posture for the national anthem. And is there any larger and more elaborate series of rituals than the Olympics? If sport has displaced church in the United States; it's not a scheduling issue.

Every single person I know, religious or not, will move heaven and earth to make time for something they believe they or their children absolutely need. Spirituality is a basic human need. It's been proven and published in peer-reviewed journals for more than 20 years now. That people don't believe that need can be met in a church, is not the fault of the culture. I'm currently re-reading the book *Leadership on the Line* by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky. They write, "When you belong to the organization or community that you are trying to lead, you are part of the problem...If you have been in a senior role for a while and there's a problem, it is almost certain that you had some part in creating it and are part of the reason it has not yet been addressed."

I turned 63 last week and have been in various church leadership roles since Middle School. I have been a member of the clergy for 28 years. So, yes, I've had a part in creating the problem. And if you've been a church member for any number of years, so have you. If you've held leadership roles, a double portion. We don't need to beat ourselves up over that; it's water under the bridge and it helps no one. But we do need to quit blaming others, and embrace the death of what we believed was our innocence. It's time to embody service with the mind of Christ, and start rowing together as a team to bring this beloved community and the larger world of God's beloved children to full, abundant, and everlasting life. To be continued. Amen.