

CALLED TO GO

Our Mission

Matthew 9:9-13

September 16, 2001

Wesley J. Gabel

Bethany Church

Last Sunday I preached in a very different world. Today national defense is not an idea or an item in a budget, it is an urgency. Last Tuesday morning the lives of thousands of Americans ended in coldly calculated acts of terror. These victims did not go where evil lurked. Instead, evil came to them uninvited. That's the nature of evil. It goes. It goes in the spirits of Dylan Kleibold and Eric Harris bringing weapons to their Colorado high school campus. It goes in the twisted thinking of Middle East terrorists who travel to a foreign country, purchase tickets on an airliner and break into its cockpit. Evil doesn't wait for people to cross on to its turf. It engulfs people on theirs. In contrast the church often waits for people to come to it. We say, "Come to our worship, come to our Sunday School, come to our dinner, come to our Bible Study." We wait for people to come. Evil knows no such constraints. It goes. It initiates. Consequently, it dominates in many places uncontested by the liberating gospel.

The church today may say: "You all come," or in Minnesotan: "Come on, you guys." But Jesus said, "Go!" One hundred times the Greek word "poreuomai" or "go" is used in the gospels. It first comes from the lips of Jesus when Matthew recounts his own conversion in the text we read. Matthew is doing his greedy thing. He's collecting money for the Romans from his countrymen. He's burned his principles. He's sold out his people. He's an agent for the enemy. No one would get this reprehensible piece of humanity into a religious meeting. No handbill would get him there. No billboard or TV ad would draw him. Religious turf would be too uncomfortable. If he had gone to the synagogue, don't you think there would have been a scene? At the least, some worshiper would have asked, "What are you doing here?" Jesus didn't act like churches that wait for people to come. There was no "come one, come all" invitation. Instead Jesus and his followers went to where Matthew was. There on his turf, Jesus spoke to Matthew. Jesus said, "Follow me." He said, "Come with me and be my disciple." And Matthew did.

Matthew doesn't write about what happened that afternoon. But we know a few things. Matthew felt valued and comfortable enough to introduce all his other disreputable friends to Jesus. That night Matthew put on a banquet, a backyard barbecue or whatever. One sure-fire method of getting people together is free food. Matthew did that. Jesus and his disciples were surrounded by other tax collectors and notorious sinners. Although I'm uncertain, I almost get the feeling that this was an outside dinner because some uninvited Pharisees knew the guest list. Whatever the case, they believed that Jesus' actions were accommodating and endorsing immorality and greed. They were angry. "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?" they hissed at the disciples. When that word got to Jesus, this is what he said:

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners (Matt 9:12-13, NIV).

God's love directed Jesus to people with little or no faith. God's love directed Jesus to people who were trapped in unbelief. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Where do you call sinners? Not from the synagogue, not from the church, not in the newspaper, not from the radio. You call them at their work. You call them in their homes. God's love sent Jesus on their turf: to their work and to their homes. It meant Jesus had to leave his comfort zone. He had to spend a great deal of time, not with the righteous but with sinners. He had to get to know them. He had to get to know their families. They were not some abstract concept. They were people he befriended. They were people whose needs defined much of his agenda and controlled much of his time.

Do you know people who have little time for God and church? They suffer unbelief. Do you know who they are, where they live, what they want and what they fear? Do you spend time on their turf? Do you know why they struggle with faith? Do you as God's priest pray for them and their needs? You are a priest. All Christian disciples are priests. You are their priest.

Whether Jesus was speaking just to his disciples or also to the skeptical Pharisees, he told them to go and learn what God meant in the Scriptures when he spoke through the prophet Hosea (Hosea 6:6), "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Both the prophets Hosea and Micah (Micah 6:6-8) confronted God's people with a pietistic life that offered sacrifices to God but in their self-centered pursuits ignored the crying need of their neighbors. I don't believe that Jesus was telling his listeners to go reread those passages. "Go and learn" was not a call for Bible study. Instead, it was a call to action.

When I was 16 years old, I drove my Mom to country churches where she preached. Once an elderly man suffered a severe heart attack. The family didn't want to wait for an

ambulance to come from the city 25 miles away. They asked me to drive him. Mile after mile, I listened to slow, labored breathing as I sped down the highway. Each minute I feared would be his last. Afterwards, I vowed that I would never be so unprepared. I took advance first aid training and later became an EMT. For awhile I worked for an ambulance service in Minneapolis/St. Paul. I remember my first car wreck. I entered the damage vehicle, assessed the injuries, used different equipment and directed the extrication. Afterwards, I was a different man. I had confidence. I learned tons that day about myself and my work. I had learned much in my training, but there was no substitute for the experience.

When Jesus said "go and learn," he was not sending people to school to learn about mercy. He was calling people to ministry where mercy is tasted and experienced. To be Jesus' disciple, you had to join him on his journey and work. If you wanted to walk with Jesus, you had to go and learn in the context of ministry. No one can be a disciple by reading the Bible. No one can be a disciple by attending church meetings. The only way one truly becomes a disciple is if they go with Christ and learn on the job.

Some might note that not all of Jesus' followers accompanied him everywhere, that some people stayed home and supported him. That's not completely true. Many did have to work at home, but they would go with him in the evening or when he was nearby. Later they were taught and supervised in ministry by those who had gone with Jesus everywhere. That's why the church grew so fast. Christian discipleship was a "going" lifestyle.

Listen to what Jesus said to his followers: "Go... to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach... heal..." (Mt. 10:6-8). "Go and make disciples of all nations..." (Mt. 28:19). "Go! I'm sending you out like lambs among wolves" (Lu. 10:3). Jesus spoke of a shepherd who goes for one lost sheep and leaves 99 that are grazing (Lu. 15:4). That's the values and lifestyle of the Christian church. That is discipleship. "Go and learn what is meant by the words, I desire mercy, not sacrifice." We cannot understand those words, unless we go. We cannot be disciples, unless we go. We cannot reveal God's heart for his children, unless we go. We can't possibly understand God's mercy, unless we go. We can't really know God as He is, unless we go.

In the months it took Bethany's leaders to articulate our call, we talked about bringing people to faith. We talked about bringing people to freedom. We discussed what that meant. However, we knew that our command was even more specific. We knew that we were directed to leave our comfort zone, to initiate, to go where there is little or no faith. We are to **go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ**. That's our mission.

To whom will you go? Are you walking the halls of your work and praying for your associates? Do you walk the streets of your neighborhood and pray for those who live by you? Do you know them? Do you know their needs? If not, how can you be their priest? How can you pray for them? How can you serve them? How can you reveal God's mercy to them. You must initiate. You must go on their turf. That's your call.

No one can envision the ways God will lead us to go in the coming months and years. However, I encourage you to begin with a spouse or a Christian friend to draft either a list of people or a locale of people whom you will cover in prayer. Pray and then get to know them as friends. You are Christ's ambassadors. If possible, don't work as a loner. Pray for a partner. Find a partner to pray with you and serve with you. Most of all, go. Leave your comfort zone and go. Only then will evil cease to dominate. Only then will people hear good news. Only then will hope, faith and love replace malice, rage and violence. Go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ.