

Multiply in Diverse Cultures

Bethany's Call:

Revelation 5:9-13; 2 Peter 3:9

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We were new to Rochester. It was summer 1981. Suddenly, I heard a siren. I think sirens are the modern day equivalent of the trumpet. Trumpets were sounded in biblical times to get people's attention whether it was to warn of an approaching enemy or to assemble people for a celebration. Similarly, sirens have multiple purposes. Some company towns sound sirens to alert people to the start and end of work. Others call volunteers to staff fire equipment. When the siren sounded that summer day in Rochester, I called home to make sure Diane heard it and was descending with our toddler to the basement. Of course, when I discovered that the siren warned of flooding, I realized I had given my family the worst possible advice.

I proved that day that it's possible to misread the meaning of a siren. It is also possible to misread the urgency. In college, we suffered a rash of fire alarms. It was inconvenient, and some students slept through them. I don't know if they were in a drunken stupor, on a sleeping pill or what. Their inaction was dangerous because the alarm did accurately give warning once.

When you hear the sounds of hurricanes, earthquakes, a tsunami, nuclear bombs, terrorism, family disintegration, advancing secularism, moral confusion, agricultural depression, local conflicts, personal disease and disaster, along with the Scriptures, do you understand the call? Do you understand through the Scriptures, the work of God's Spirit among us and the complexion of our environment God's call for us. At Bethany we've been both reflecting and responding, we've been discerning our call and organizing our response.

So far, we've heard the call to *obey Christ completely*. Since Adam and Eve, people have been reinventing a God more to their liking. You do not worship God when you worship your reinvention of him. Similarly, you do not obey Christ when you reinvent what he says or the meaning of what he says. Any erosion of your confidence in the Bible is an erosion of your confidence in God's love and God's wisdom. It will separate you from him. In contrast, we at Bethany are not just about Jesus; we are more specifically about obeying **everything** he commanded.

Second, we've heard the call to *be a restoring fellowship*. It is one thing to believe in the love of God. It is a totally different thing to be restored by the love of God. There is no substitute for the water of life that fills the vacuum in our souls. There is no substitute for the washing of rebirth and the renewal of the Holy Spirit. Our calling is to become a changed people who change people. Change produced by the love of God in Christ Jesus!

Third, we've heard the call to *network with all of Christ's church*. There is only one temple that reveals God to the world. There is only one body, one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Without the entire body we are incomplete and crippled in our work and life. Jesus prayed for our unity that the world might know about him and about their redemption.

There's more to our call. When Bethany's founding pastor Richard Harper articulated our reason for being, he declared "*We seek to bring a faithful witness to Jesus Christ.*" Such a statement not only implies that we faithfully represent Jesus as the Lord who is worthy of complete obedience, but that we also share Jesus with others.

Bethany's mission states: *Go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ*. That scares some of us. We conjure up images of Jehovah Witnesses or Mormons going door to door and interrupting people's suppers or other activities. We feel the ire ourselves and see it in

others. We see someone downtown with a bullhorn and know that doesn't fit us. When Jesus commanded his disciples to go and make disciples, he was not telling them to do anything he wasn't doing himself. Jesus didn't go door to door, calling on people he didn't know, interrupting their supper and saying, "Have you heard of me?" Instead, he went where he was expected to go, the synagogue, and shared as he was given opportunity whatever was appropriate for the moment. Moreover, he often ministered to people's needs and then explained more clearly the kingdom of God. He then found himself invited into homes, even of notorious sinners; and he went, ate what they offered, served their needs, responded to their questions and explained God's plan. One time when Jesus was hungry and thirsty, he got into a spiritual dialogue as he asked a woman for water. When it was over and he had ministered healing just through his conversation. Jesus was so full of joy that he was no longer hungry.

When we go where we are expected to go, minister to needs in the love we've received from God, and share what is appropriate as we have opportunity, we'll see people open their ears and hearts to the redemption they need. Such results bring more joy than winning a ball game, receiving a medal, or achieving some difficult feat. Heaven dances and so do our hearts.

As I observed how Jesus went and gave witness, I discovered he did it in various cultural settings. Sometimes, he was in the temple or synagogue. Sometimes, he was in a fishing boat or on a trip. Sometimes, he was in the house of a friend or of a notorious sinner. He shared his news in various cultural settings, even though God had him focus on his fellow Jews. Although he targeted Jews, he found himself also ministering to Samaritans, Roman soldiers and a Canaanite woman. Jesus called his disciples to help him reach the various cultural groups among the Jews. After his resurrection, however, he expanded that call to all nations and the ends of the earth.

God's creation of those very nations was purposeful. Paul declared:

From one man he (God) made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. (Acts 17:26-27, NIV)

Paul tells us that all the nations descend from one man. He infers that we are all tied together in Adam and Eve, and made in the image of God. There is no superior race, no favored race. Paul says that our times and places are determined by God. That means there is a divine hand and purpose in the founding of each nation. There is also a divine hand and purpose in immigration. All these nations were inhabited and established through immigration. God was doing something. Paul said that God determined *when* and *where* these people lived so that they would seek him, maybe reach out for him and find him. Does Paul give you a clue to the divine purpose for many nations and races? It is so people will seek God. Does he give you an idea why a diverse population has immigrated to Rochester? Why have Northern Europeans, and more recently Somalians, Sudanese, Laotians, Hmong, Korean, people from various Latin nations, why have the Indians and Pakistanis, the Ukrainians and Philipinos come to Rochester? Is God using the clinic, IBM, the job market and other relationships to bring people here so that they will seek, reach out and find the God who made them?

When you go where you are expected to go, when you walk in your neighborhood and love your neighbor as yourself, when you go to the store, the school, the workplace, the clinic, aren't you mixing with people of different cultures? Isn't this divinely orchestrated so that people can find God and you can minister the grace that every individual and every people need? It seems to me that God separated people into races and nations not so that we would all share the same culture in various places. Instead, God planted us in separate places so that different cultures would be established, and through Christ come to reflect the greatness of God.

God's vision for the world is shared in this new song of heaven. To Jesus is sung:

You are worthy to take the scroll and break its seals and open it. For you were killed, and your blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. And you have caused them to become God's Kingdom and his priests. (Revelation 5:9-10, NLT)

Jesus was killed. His blood took the right for God's enemies to completely enslave and destroy any people group. There will be no more Amalekites or Hittites wiped from earth's memory. Indeed, the song says God will be represented and served in every cluster of humanity through Christ. That requires the multiplication of disciples in diverse cultures, fellowship in diverse cultures, worship in diverse cultures, intentional ministry in diverse cultures. It requires people like you and me at Bethany to live cross-cultural missionary lives. The gospel can be experienced by diverse families here in Rochester, and then in loving relationships passed to their relatives and friends who are here and to those who live in distant lands. God builds his kingdom through friendships!

My 89 year-old-mother returns tomorrow from Indianapolis where she went to witness the birth of her great-grandson. She said it was a learning experience. It was more than that. New life brings such joy. As the song sounds joyfully in heaven about this new life multiplied among the nations, you and I have the joy to carry it out here on earth. We don't have to be obnoxious, self-promoting or superhuman. Instead, we just need to embrace the love of God in Jesus, live in that love, serve and share wherever we are expected to go and wherever we have an invitation. God's calling us not only to go (and in love and humility) bring people to faith and freedom. He's also calling us to the joy of multiplying ministry and congregations in diverse cultures. Wow! What does that reveal about the love and nature of God?