

Bring Renewal

Bethany's Call:

Isaiah 41:17-20

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If Jesus was physically present for one half hour and had all of our ears, what would he say? Would he minister to our broken bodies? Would he focus on our spiritual brokenness and punch through some deception we suffer? Would he affirm something we are doing? Would he encourage something new? What would Jesus do with that half hour?

As we gather, I believe the Spirit of Jesus is here. I believe that the Holy Spirit is working and speaking through the faith and spiritual gifts that are being exercised. I'm convinced the Holy Spirit is clearly pointing out the way for us as we consider our mission: *Go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ.* In recent years we at Bethany have made some changes. We used to gather one time for worship as a large family. Now we meet twice on Sunday morning and worship quite differently. You can not worship here for one hour and know how this church worships. You cannot look at one worship gathering and know what Bethany looks and feels like. So what are we becoming and what is the Spirit of Jesus saying to us? Who are we and where are we headed? What is Jesus saying to us?

If we are a church, then we are a fellowship of Jesus' disciples. We are not just people who believe in Jesus. We are people who are becoming like Jesus in our character and in our relationships with one another and the world. This fall I've been outlining God's vision for this church. We are a fellowship of disciples; and *first, we are called to be an obedient fellowship with Christ.* Christ's words, not our tastes or wants, direct our lives. *Second, we are called to be*

a restoring fellowship with one another. We cannot go and bring people to faith and freedom unless the friendships we cultivate are dominated by the love of God and restore us from brokenness and deception we suffer in this world. Third, *we are called to be an empowered fellowship with the church universal.* We are built and equipped by the spiritual gifts God gives the whole body. We are to benefit from the African church, the Asian church, the Latin church, and the various denominations that lift up Jesus as Lord and Savior. *Fourth, we are called to be a redeeming fellowship with diverse peoples.* That doesn't mean we won't focus on one group or another for a time. It does mean our efforts must lead to people of every culture, language, race and community tasting God's passionate and personal love for them in Jesus Christ.

The final aspect of God's vision for us at Bethany results from God's love for all his creation. We've witnessed such suffering in recent days and have been responding to the aftermath of devastating hurricanes. We've been a drop point for many supplies that are helping people in the Gulf region. Among the Bethany family alone we've observed a generous outpouring of giving and compassion. Although it is wonderful to see God's love chase victims of Hurricane Katrina and Rita through sacrificial service and generosity of people, we've seen the suffering multiply. Over 19,000 are confirmed dead from an earthquake in a disputed province of Pakistan. We've seen flooding in New England, fires in the California, mudslides in Guatemala, and the worst natural disaster recorded in history, the South Asia tsunami. The last official figure for dead and missing is 297,046. We in Rochester are nestled in rural America. Rural America has suffered economic and population decline for fifty years. Rural America is full of ghost communities, aging people and Prozac. When you travel west out of Rochester on US Highway 14, the further you drive, the more depressed communities become. By the time you get to South Dakota, there is very little hope.

What is the role of Jesus and his disciples in such circumstances? Since we've have been placed in proximity to such pain, what is our call? What is Christ doing with his disciples in other places? Let's learn from the universal church and some Christians in the Fiji Islands?

(VIDEO CLIP – *Let the Sea Resound* [chapter 10/24, 0.06 – 7.05])

The Fiji Islands are a long way from Rochester. Their experience may seem even more distant. Yet it is being reproduced in various ways all across the planet, including North America and the United States. In many places neighborhoods, cities and even regions are being revived by disciples who believe all things are possible for them who believe.

In the 41st chapter of Isaiah, God declared that He wants to reveal himself through his care of people and the land that nourishes them.

I will open up rivers for them... I will give them fountains of water in the valleys. In the deserts they will find pools of water. Rivers fed by springs will flow across the dry, parched ground. I will plant trees... on barren land. Everyone will see this miracle and understand that it is the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, who did it. (Isaiah 41:18-20, NLT)

When Israel dedicated the temple of Solomon, God gave them this promise about their lives and land.

At times I might shut up the heavens so that no rain falls, or I might command locusts to devour your crops, or I might send plagues among you. Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:13-14, NLT)

God gave a promise of healing that is hard to get our minds around. In the New Testament, there is no doubt that Jesus' promises outstripped his disciples' faith and experience. That frustrated Jesus, not to mention, the disciples screaming in a rocking boat and Peter sinking in the waves. It is work to believe. It is also God's work in us. Jesus patiently and persistently worked with his unbelieving disciples until they came to do things they would not have believed.

Today, I'm convinced that the Spirit of Jesus is doing the same thing with us. Our experience of prayer may not encourage us to embrace our call to be a *renewing fellowship with creation*. We may think this is all irrelevant and wring our hands when we see cultural erosion, multiplying disasters, deteriorating neighborhoods, and rural blight. It is work to believe. Once an audience asked Jesus, "What must we do to do the works of God?" Jesus answered:

The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent. (John 6:29, NIV)

It was work then to believe and welcome Jesus. It is work now to believe and welcome the Spirit of Jesus. It is work to trust God's promises and recognize the Spirit's visitation. Notice that wherever the kingdom of God advances, people and creation are blessed!

So can you believe that is God's will for us? Time and again, Jesus said to his audience: "Let it be done according to your faith." What is your faith like? Will you let God build your faith? Will you stubbornly draw lines so that God must prove himself according to your way of thinking? Will you own up to your unbelief, ask God to release you from guilt and ask him to write in you a faith that is worthy of God?

The Spirit of Jesus is speaking to us at Bethany. Are we hearing? Jesus wants to reveal his Father's love and power today. He's calling us to be a fellowship of disciples, an obedient fellowship with Christ, a restoring fellowship with one another, an empowered fellowship with his church universal, a redeeming fellowship with diverse peoples... and a renewing fellowship with God's creation. Jesus is saying, "Let those with ears hear!"