

## SENT ON A MISSION

Matthew 10:16-33

I begin this sermon with a short test from our Catechism, the good news is that it is an open book test. Please turn with me to p. 855 in the BCP to *The Ministry*.

*Q. Who are the ministers of the Church?*

*A. The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons. (the “laity” means the people – all of us, the first and most important order of ministry)*

*Q. What is the ministry of the laity?*

*A. The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.*

Our work – our ministry – as God’s people is to represent Jesus and his Church and to bear witness to him wherever we may be, in all contexts and situations we may find ourselves, including the most compromising. There’s no place we can go or be where we don’t continue to have that basic assignment – to represent Christ and his Church and to carry on his work of reconciliation in the world. We don’t get lunch breaks. We don’t get time off. We don’t get vacations from that assignment. We sometimes send people out on *mission trips*, which is generally a very good thing. But we should remember that as Christians we are always on a mission trip. We are *on 24/7* representing Christ and his Church and carrying on his work of reconciliation in the world. That’s our assignment as God’s holy people.

Our Gospel passage from Matthew is a series of admonitions about going out on mission. It is in the context of Jesus sending his disciples out into the surrounding towns and villages. Matthew has collected many of Jesus’ sayings about *sending* his disciples into the world. More than anything else they are *warnings* and challenges; a series of reality checks. Jesus never promises that it will be easy.

The first thing that Jesus tells us is that it will be hard. “*See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves.*” Proclaiming my love and truth will cause dissension, it will break up families. Some people will hate you. You will be persecuted and rejected and insulted and belittled. Well, Jesus certainly doesn’t sugar coat the job description does he?

The second thing Jesus tells us is surprising to many. *Be devious*. The way Jesus put it was “*be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*” Oh how sadly we often mix up Jesus’ directions and become as clueless as doves and as innocent as snakes. Remember the *Church Lady* character in Saturday Night Live? She was always well meaning, but

wholly ineffective, getting all worked up about some non-issue. Jesus never calls us to be naïve and foolish. He calls us to be sincere and honest and *innocent* about our purpose and calling to love as he loved. But he invites us to be devious and use all our clever ability to get things done for his Kingdom.

A third thing Jesus tells us – and this really is the main point in today’s Gospel lesson – is to get our fears straightened out. What should we be afraid of? Not persecution or physical harm or rejection or ridicule or suffering or pain or loss, or hunger or poverty, Jesus tells us. God is greater than any harm that can befall us. His Kingdom is eternal. His rewards go beyond this world. But what we should be afraid of is losing our integrity, losing our soul. What Jesus challenges us to do here is so hard! It’s not the way of the world. Our natural instinct is for self-preservation, self-protection. Jesus challenges us to have the *courage* to put those things second and to put his message of love and reconciliation first. Instead of being afraid of those who might do us harm or want to do us harm Jesus warns us to fear most the compromises we all too easily make with ourselves and the world. Fear losing your integrity. Fear selling out your soul. When we make the good news of Jesus Christ into a product and benefit from its sale, when we are so intent on our version of the *truth* that we fail to love others, when we lose our humility and begin to become arrogant, when we compromise the truth and offer self-serving lies in place of the truth, when we don’t admit our faults and our fallibility and only see other’s faults, when we overemphasize our own comfort and under prioritize the needs of the poor, when we put the needs of the institutional church above the mission of Jesus... (You could probably add a few more such examples) Jesus’ point is that what we should be afraid of is not our own self-preservation, but the loss of integrity. In Jesus’ words, “*fear him who has power to destroy both body and soul in Hell.*” I don’t believe that Jesus is warning so much about God as judge but to be afraid of those compromises that might ultimately cut us off from his love and grace and mercy.

A fourth point Jesus makes about mission and being sent is to trust God’s love for you. Even a sparrow, which is practically worthless in the world’s valuation, is precious in God’s eyes. “*Do not be afraid,*” Jesus tells us, “*you are of more value than many sparrows.*” An old time gospel hymn puts it beautifully.

***His eye is on the sparrow***

*Why should I feel discouraged, why should the Shadows come,  
Why should my heart be lively, and long for heav’n and home  
When Jesus is my portion? My constant friend is He:  
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me;  
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me...  
I sing because I am happy, I sing because I’m free...  
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.*

So ***fear not!*** God is watching you. God is with you wherever you go, whatever you do. When Jesus sent out his disciples in the Great Commission he promised, in the very last words in the Gospel of Matthew, “*And remember, I am with always, to the end of the age.*” God will never abandon you. Trust him and don’t be afraid.

Last of all, Jesus' series of admonitions about being sent out on mission warn us that there will be a test. And it won't be the catechism. If our life and words and witness ultimately deny me and deny my love before others then Jesus promises that he will deny us before the Father's throne. But if our words and witness and courage ultimately affirm Jesus and his love and message of reconciliation before others then he promises that he will affirm us before his Father in heaven.

We as Christians, as Jesus' people are a people sent on a mission to represent Christ and his Church and to bear witness to him wherever we may be. It won't be an easy assignment. We should be devious and effective in doing good. We should get our fears straightened out – not fearing for our own welfare but fearing instead the loss of our own integrity. Ultimately we need not be afraid because God loves us and is with us, wherever we go. And finally we should remember that yes, there will be a test.