

Growing in Mission

Rev. Ralph Patrick

“Jesus therefore said to them again, ‘Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained’” (John 20:21–23).

It is exciting, and perhaps a bit overwhelming, to contemplate coming to the seminary. However, one quickly adjusts, and soon the seminary environment becomes home. After a short time the seminarian is called away from home, and into “fields white for harvest.” That field might be literal, in a small town in the middle of farm fields somewhere in the Midwest. Or it could be in the inner city, where a field can only be seen in the figurative sense. Or perhaps it might be in a far away country, where the fields are a different color and speak a much different language. Wherever one is sent (which is the meaning of the word mission), the Call is certain to be initially overwhelming, just as it was for the disciples.

Following Jesus’ death the disciples were afraid and uncertain of their future. This is how seminarians frequently feel. I remember my first Call to the inner city of Chicago, the euphoria soon gave way to reality, and a recognition that the task that awaited me was far beyond my abilities. How much more for the disciples? They would soon be called to be Christ’s witnesses in “Jerusalem, and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” Talk about being in over your head. But the resurrected Lord came and stood among them, and gave them His peace. And then He commissioned them, called them, and equipped them with the Holy Spirit. They would not be alone. He granted them the Office of the Keys, that peculiar church function by which Christ remits the sins of those who are penitent, and retains the sins of those who are not. This was not something that just anyone and everyone could do—this was reserved for the “called and ordained servants of the Word.” The disciples were the first to occupy the pastoral office, but certainly not the last. Their primary role was to administer Christ’s Word and Sacraments according to His bidding; and

to be faithful even unto death. Though we are separated by centuries, it is the same Call that He gives men today as they enter into the Holy Ministry; to faithfully preach His Word and administer His life-giving Sacraments in a world that is dying in sin.

How easy, and tempting, it is to lose sight of this. The Rev. Carl Schlutz once related to the following to a young seminarian: "When I was first in the ministry, my goal was to save the world. After a number of years I decided to be content to save the people in the city where I was serving. After more time elapsed in my ministry, I changed my focus on saving the people in my congregation. Finally, toward the end of my ministry, I realized that I didn't need to save anyone, for they have a Savior, Jesus Christ, and it was up to HIM to do the saving. I was simply his tool." Pastor Schlutz, whom the Lord has now called to glory, was a very wise man and a very faithful pastor. We would all do well to heed his words.

We live in a success-oriented society, one in which numerical growth, power, personal prestige, and popularity is the bottom line. When pastors leave the seminary we are prone to buy into this type of thinking. Far too many pastors are more concerned with feeding their egos, than with crucifying them. As a result we place the emphasis on what WE are doing, where WE are doing it, and how WE can get it done. This results either in disappointment when OUR expectations aren't met, in which case we place our name on a Call list, convincing ourselves that our work is finished; or it creates a false sense of satisfaction with ourselves and pride (albeit cloaked in sanctified "Jesus talk") in what we have accomplished for the sake of the kingdom.

Christ does not call us to success, nor to making the mission (whatever that may mean) our primary mission. He calls us to feed His sheep, to faithfully proclaim His saving Gospel of Word and Sacrament, to sow seeds of salvation, and allow the Holy Spirit to grant growth if, when, and where He chooses. This was the Call of those first pastors, and it remains the primary calling and purpose for the pastoral ministry today.

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