

Sermon on Matthew 9:35–10:23

Sent to serve – sent to proclaim

When we lived in Indiana, we made several trips to Shippshewana. Shippshewana is a cute little city in an Amish Area.

I have to say that I was always fascinated by the Amish way of life. Not because I want to give up electricity, cars, or smartphones. But because they ask a question that many of us rarely ask:

What do we really need?

Many things that we consider essential, they consider unnecessary. Their goal is not simply to live differently. Their goal is to focus on what matters most.

Now, I am not suggesting that we should all become Amish. But I do think there is something we can learn from their willingness to ask what is truly necessary and what might simply distract us from what is most important.

That question came to mind when I read today's Gospel.

Jesus sends out his disciples, and his instructions are remarkable. He tells them not to load themselves down with extra possessions. No unnecessary baggage. No extra security. No stockpiling supplies for every possible situation.

Why?

Because Jesus wants them focused on their mission.

He wants them focused on the people they are being sent to serve.

He wants them focused on the kingdom of God.

And that mission begins with Jesus seeing people.

Matthew tells us:

"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

Everything begins with compassion.

Jesus sees people.

He sees their struggles. He sees their fears. He sees their illnesses. He sees their loneliness.

He sees their need. And then he does something remarkable. He sends others.

God's response to the needs of the world is not simply to perform miracles from heaven.

God's response is to send people who are willing to serve.

And that movement has never stopped.

Christ is still sending people today.

Some are called to be pastors.

Some are called to be deacons.

And all Christians are called to participate in God's mission in the world.

That brings me to something that is often misunderstood in the ELCA.

Many of you know that my husband, Kornelius, is preparing for ministry on the **Word and Service** track. Yet I have discovered that many Lutherans know what a pastor is but are not always sure what a deacon is.

In the ELCA there are two rostered ministries.

One is **Word and Sacrament**. These are pastors, who bear particular responsibility for preaching the Gospel, administering Baptism and Holy Communion, and leading the church's sacramental life.

The other is **Word and Service** ministry. These are deacons.

Sometimes there is confusion because in other churches the word "deacon" may refer to elected leaders, elders, or council members. Those are important roles, but they are different

from ELCA deacons, who are rostered ministers of the church with a distinct calling and preparation for ministry.

The word *deacon* comes from the Greek word **diakonos**, meaning servant, minister, or one who acts on behalf of another. Interestingly, that word does not actually appear in today's Gospel. Instead, Matthew speaks of **disciples**—*mathetai*—**apostles**—*apostoloi*, meaning those who are sent—and **workers**—*ergatai*—for the harvest.

Yet the entire passage is filled with the spirit of what the New Testament means by *diakonos*. Jesus sends people to serve. He sends them to heal. He sends them to bring peace. He sends them to proclaim God's kingdom. He sends them to make God's love visible.

That is the heart of diakonia. People are sent by Christ so that God's compassion becomes something people can actually experience. It is important, however, to understand that the ministries of pastors and deacons overlap in many ways. Sometimes people assume that pastors are responsible for the Word while deacons are responsible for service.

But the title **Word and Service** reminds us that this is not true. The word *Word* comes first for a reason. Deacons are not simply social workers connected to the church. They are ministers of the Gospel. They proclaim Christ, teach the faith, lead ministries, offer spiritual care, pray with people, and bear witness to God's presence in the world. Many deacons preach. Many teach Bible studies. Many provide pastoral care in hospitals, schools, universities, social service agencies, and other settings where the church meets people beyond the walls of the sanctuary. Word and Service belong together. In fact, that is exactly what we see in today's Gospel. Jesus gives the disciples two inseparable tasks.

They are to proclaim: "The kingdom of heaven has come near."

And they are to heal the sick, care for those in need, and restore people to community.

Word and service. Proclamation and compassion. Faith and action. They belong together because they belong to Jesus. Likewise, pastors serve people in very practical ways. Pastors visit the sick, comfort the grieving, counsel those in crisis, and walk alongside people through difficult seasons of life. Both pastors and deacons proclaim. Both pastors and deacons serve. The difference is not whether they proclaim or serve.

The difference lies in the particular emphasis of their calling. Pastors bear a special responsibility for Word and Sacrament. Deacons bear a special responsibility for connecting the church with the needs of the world. You might say that pastors help the church encounter Christ at the font, at the table, and through the proclamation of the Gospel. Deacons help the church encounter Christ in the hospital room, the classroom, the neighborhood, the shelter, the campus, and wherever people are in need. Both ministries belong together. Both are gifts to the church. Both point us back to Christ. And both remind us of what Jesus is doing in today's Gospel.

He is sending people. But this calling is not reserved only for pastors and deacons.

Every baptized Christian is sent. Every baptized Christian is called to participate in God's mission. Every baptized Christian is called to make God's love visible.

And perhaps that brings us back to the lesson we can learn from the Amish. Not necessarily their clothing. Not necessarily their lifestyle. But their willingness to ask:

What do we really need? Jesus seems to ask the same question when he sends out the disciples. What do you really need? Not endless possessions. Not perfect security.

Not complete certainty. What you need is a heart that sees people the way Jesus sees them.

What you need is compassion. What you need is a willingness to go where Christ sends you.

Because that is how today's Gospel begins. Jesus sees the crowds. Jesus has compassion.

Jesus sends his disciples. And today, Jesus sends us. With his Word. With his love. With his mission. And with the promise that he goes with us wherever we are sent.

Amen.