

THE WITNESS OF LOVE

Post Presbyterian Church

June 22, 2008

Matthew 9: 35- 10: 8

Six years ago I flew to Austin to perform Nedra Bray's elaborate outdoor wedding overlooking the shores of Lake Travis. Nedra and her parents attended Second B while she was growing up and I had the privilege of being Nedra's youth minister many years ago. Each time I reconnect with the kids from my youth ministry days, I have lots of fun, I am reminded of how old I am becoming, and I am able to see first hand the value of ministry, faith, and church community.

I had lots of reading material for my flight to Austin but instead I spent the hour talking to the man next to me. We introduced ourselves and Steve asked me why I was going to Austin and I told him and then he told me that he had been in Lubbock negotiating real estate deals and was now headed back to his home for the weekend. He told me how Lubbock's economy was booming and he was hoping to prosper from our good times. Steve said he had real estate in California and Austin but had never conducted business in this part of the world before and honestly was sometimes unsure of how to handle himself. He told me he was in the contract negotiation phase of things with two prominent businessmen in Lubbock and on two occasions had been introduced to other

Lubbock businessmen and been told, “Now, this man is a good Christian.”

Steve revealed that he is a non practicing Jew and while he didn't really know a proper response, he also wasn't sure what that comment really meant and so he asked, “Since you are a Christian minister, could you explain to me what it means for someone to tell me that they are a good Christian?” I can't repeat all I said about people who are deluded enough to **think** they are a good Christian and then have the crass naivety to tell others about what good Christians they and their friends are, but in essence I said, “Those kind of Christians make me very nervous and I usually don't trust much of what they say or do. I have found that people of deep faith rarely speak about it and certainly would not consider themselves to be good. It is because of my encounters with good Christians such as these that I am much more comfortable working with the dying.” He laughed and shook his head in agreement.

In my not very humble opinion, Christians who have to talk about how **good** they are, totally miss the point of the Christian life. In our text for this morning, when Jesus sent the twelve disciples out to proclaim the good news, to cure the sick, to raise the dead, to cleanse the lepers, and to cast out demons, nowhere do we read, “Tell everyone you meet what a good Christian you are and how much you do for your church and your community.” Instead, Jesus reminded them that as they had received so much life they could never have gotten by their own successes, so now they were commissioned to go

and to share some of the life, love and faith that had given them great purpose, meaning and strength.

In a sermon entitled, **Heaven at Hand**, one of my favorite ministers, the Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor says, “In a world that can be hard and scary sometimes, it is tempting to think of the church as a hideout, the place where those of us who know the secret password can gather to celebrate our good fortune. As we repeat our favorite stories and eat the food that has been prepared for us, it is tempting to think of our selves as consumers of God’s love, chosen people who have been given more good gifts than we can open at one sitting: healing, forgiveness, restoration, and resurrection. Then one day the Holy Spirit comes knocking at the door, disturbing our members-only meeting and reminding us that it is time to share. We are not to be just consumers after all, but also providers of God’s love, authorized agents sent out to speak and act in Christ’s name.”

“Next to the calling of the disciples,” Barbara Brown Taylor says, “I expect that Matthew’s story about the disciples sending forth is one of the most confrontational stories in all of scripture. Can you imagine? There you are, perfectly content to be a follower, when Jesus comes home all worn out one day with his hair hanging in his face and his clothes ringed with sweat and dirt. He looks around at those of you who have been with him all along and says, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. I need some help and I’m nominating you.’ Then he holds his big hands out over your heads and says a prayer that travels down your backbone like a chill,

giving you authority over demons, disease, and even death and when he has finished you open your eyes and look at each other to see if you can tell any difference. Next you take a deep breath to test whether anything has changed inside. Do you feel wiser, stronger, or more capable? Nope. Maybe, just blessed, sort of.”

When Jesus sent his disciples out into the world, he made clear that we are all called to be not just consumers of God’s love but also providers of the love that claims us and sustains us. Jesus emphasized with his life that when we give of ourselves everyone benefits and in the transactions of compassion and kindness between people, our world is made more whole. Jesus never intended the disciples or us to think of the Christian faith as a status symbol in the business world or our social circles. To do so is to miss the point of how Jesus sends us out into the world to love and to serve others.

While this morning’s scripture from Matthew is rich and complex, it is a simple reminder that a compassionate heart and a life filled with acts of love are probably what Jesus had in mind when he invited people to a life of ministry and mission. The text for today tells us, “When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” And when Jesus commissioned the disciples, the words he used in sending them out was, “Proclaim, cure, raise, cleanse, cast out.” The picture of discipleship Jesus paints for his followers here is about compassionate action and doing love. Being a good Christian is not

about being comfortable in our life of faith or in having the right beliefs. Rather being a disciple of Jesus Christ is first and foremost about finding compassionate ways to give life and love away every day of our lives.

When I look to others to be God's presence for me and when I seek to be God's presence to others, it boils down to love. When we choose to let Jesus show in our lives, it is always much more about grace than judgment and always more about being compassionate, respectful and caring than it is about being right and certain and all-knowing. When I was youth minister at Second Baptist in Lubbock twenty years ago, I met every Wednesday night with the youth Sunday school teachers to study the next Sunday's lesson. When these dedicated teachers worried about how they were going to teach the youth the great theological truths entrusted to them each Sunday, I encouraged them to relax and I assured them that they were probably not going to teach the youth much about God through their meticulous and well-scripted lesson plans. I told them many times that the youth would most likely **NOT** remember much from the lessons themselves but they would remember their whole life long if they had been loved and affirmed and cherished and valued when they came to Sunday School. I always told these good teachers that if they accomplished this then they would do more to further the youth's positive experience of God than any wise teachings they might impart.

John Claypool was a minister at Second B for about three years before I arrived there in the late 1980's and for many reasons, John always referred to his experience at Second B as his "Land of beginning again." I preached at Second B last Sunday for the first time in many years and in looking back upon the important place Second B played in my personal and professional life, I often refer to those formative five years as my "Land of beginning."

When I moved to Lubbock in January of 1987, I came here not knowing a soul and I felt I had landed on another planet for about my first year. The flat land and big sky, the Bible belt culture, and the way people talked were all very different than my familiar upstate New York roots. I was told that I was the cheapest person the church had ever moved because I shipped my belongings in cardboard boxes, I sold my old blue and white Plymouth Duster for \$100 and flew to West Texas where I was shown God's great compassion and love from the beginning. Paul and Stephanie Nash allowed me to live with them for two months before my magical alley house that Charlsie and Jerry Eubank rented to me for eight years became available. Hardy Clemmons sold me his beloved 1971 Volkswagen Bug for \$750 and the church gave me \$500 to purchase professional clothes. Josie Sterling and Beth Pennington helped me to be more fashionable and my dear husband now wishes they hadn't been so successful!

From the start, I was taken in and cared for by strangers who became dear friends and by their example and extravagant love I was

allowed to make the faith my own and find creative, fun and life affirming ways to share God's love and compassion in my life and ministry beyond Second B. Second Baptist Church was formed in the late 1950's by a group of people from First Baptist Church who wanted to find more creative and less legalistic ways to share God's love in Lubbock and so this radical group of Baptists was never allowed to be a part of the city or state Baptist fellowship because they ordained women as deacons and ministers and did not believe that people had to be re-baptized when they joined their church. I learned from a group of the faithful who were on the fringes of the good Christian community in Lubbock what it was to care for the sick children in East Lubbock, to stick their necks out and ordain women as elders and ministers, to be huge supporters of feeding the poor by helping to establish the South Plains Food Bank, to be initial supporters of Habitat for Humanity and the South Plains Aids Resource Center and to encourage every member to be a minister and to use his or her gifts, passions and holy connections with others to make this world a better place for all of God's people.

The place I began my ministry is very similar to this church which has become my cherished faith home for most of the past twelve years. I have always felt loved and cared for by you all in the ups and downs of my recent life, and Jerry and I continue to affirm that we have the best ministry gig around! I marvel at how you faithfully, quietly, quickly, and generously take care of each other and your friends and neighbors in difficult times. It is humbling to see how you all have found creative ways to make Post's economy

grow and thrive when many West Texas towns have withered and all but died. And it is so wonderful to see how theatre and the arts have flourished here in recent years and how these many venues nurture our souls and take us all to a new level.

It has been Albert Einstein once said, “That which we do for ourselves stays with us. That which we do for others lives on and is immortal.” An excerpt from a book entitled, **Doing the Truth in Love** by Michael Hines, underlines the fact that God’s call to a life of faith is first and foremost about having compassion and doing love.

The New Testament has a great deal to say about the end of the world, but there is not a word describing any criteria for the last judgment except the passage from Matthew 25 that says when you did something of service to the least of these, you really did it for the Lord. There is not a word in scripture about whether you belonged to the church or were baptized, not a syllable about whether you ever celebrated the Eucharist or prayed, or what creed you preferred or what theology you embraced. The only criterion for the last judgment is “Did you give yourself away to those who needed you?”

When we find ways to give life and love away, we become participants in the healing of our world and we experience new life and greater wholeness in our own souls. If we want to be fully alive, we must be willing to do what we can to take care of each other and not complicate things by arguing about the specifics. If we want to be people of faith, we must find someone to love, some cause to give ourselves to, or something we care about so deeply we will freely open our hearts, souls and checkbooks for.

When we focus on being both consumers and providers of God's love then we know that Jesus, our model and strength, sends us out with nothing at all and yet with everything we truly need---compassion and love. On this day, we are humbly reminded that being a good Christian is not about being comfortable in our life of faith or in having the right beliefs. Rather being a disciple of Jesus Christ is first and foremost about finding compassionate ways to give life and love away every day of our lives.

As I struggled with how to end this sermon, I went for a long walk yesterday morning to clear my heart and mind and what came to me was the title of the familiar hymn, "They will know we are Christians by our love." Amen

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Gracious and Loving God, we gather in this place on this beautiful summer day to worship You and we pray that in the quiet of these holy moments together we might have a heightened awareness of the love that has claimed us and the grace that continues to sustain us. May our sitting, thinking, singing, and praying together open our eyes, ears, and hearts more fully to the miracles of your presence with us and in us. Life is often difficult and we get overwhelmed by the many responsibilities, challenges, and problems we face in our work, families, and community affairs. Enable us to be patient, diligent, and compassionate as we relate to others and seek to live lives of meaning, purpose, and faith.

We are thankful for reminders in our everyday lives of our human connectedness to all people. We are humbled to realize that when we give of ourselves everyone benefits and in the transactions of compassion and kindness between people, our world is made more whole. When Jesus sent his disciples out into the world, he made clear that we are all called to be not just consumers of God's love but also providers of the love that claims us and sustains us. We know that Jesus never intended the disciples or us to think of the Christian faith as a status symbol in the business world or our social circles. To do so is to miss the point of how Jesus sends us out into the world to love and to serve others. Remind us that the way to experience eternal life here and now is to serve and bless those who

have needs and when we live in this way, we will experience an abundance of life we could never get for ourselves.

We pray on this day that You would be with our friends and loved ones who are experiencing illness, grief or depression. Help them and us to see that it should not be in our faith or limited vision or secure world that we trust to live by each day. We often forget that life is so very short and precious and fragile and that we would do far better to allow the faith and graciousness of you, O God to inform our living and our relating each day. May our worship on this day remind us this week of the things that truly nourish our souls. May we have the perspective and courage we need to live Christ's mandate of love, and to more fully devote ourselves to his mission of bringing God's kingdom to our unfinished world and incomplete selves. In the name of the One who showed us how to live and to love, we pray, Our Father, who art in heaven....AMEN.