

“As the father has sent me, so I send you.” When we hear Jesus say those words to his disciples, we may assume he is speaking only to them. Perhaps we want him to be speaking only to them. But who else is meant to receive the commission to go out and minister to the needs of others? Could it be us? We who call ourselves Christians.

In the reading from Acts this morning Luke glowingly described a community of Christians. Biblical scholars agree Luke has idealized the community of first believers. Still, there must have been something remarkable about the witness to Christ’s Resurrection by those new Christians because Acts does tell of the rapid growth of the early church. Their lives were an attraction to those around them.

Which gives us reason to reflect on the witness we give to our faith. Those first believers were not icons or holy cards, they lived in the real world --just as we do. How much do our lives reflect the gospel of Jesus? Do we show in concrete ways the mercy and compassion for those in need which it seems characterized the earliest Christian community? The Acts lesson expresses the fulfillment we Christians hope for, but must admit, is not yet fully achieved in our local or national church.

Yet the church would not have been successful if Jesus had not returned to be with his disciples. The disciples were confused and frightened after Jesus’ death on the cross. It is believed that after Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, the disciples continued to meet in the upper room where the Last Supper had been held. But they met in something very much like terror. They knew the hatred of the Jewish leaders who had condemned Jesus to death, and they were afraid that their turn would come next.

And then the unexpected happened. They were hiding behind locked doors and suddenly Jesus appeared in their midst. What a shock that must have been. They had heard some of the women who were among Jesus' followers say they had seen Jesus in the garden near his burial tomb, but the disciples did not know what to do with that information. Some of them had even gone and seen the empty tomb. But what to make of that? Could the body have been stolen? Were his enemies trying to discredit his very existence?

Jesus knew his disciples would be shocked by his sudden appearance. But he could not let them continue hiding in a locked room. He loved them and wanted to calm their fears.

There is a powerful message for us here as well. There is nothing that can keep Jesus from entering our lives when we need peace and his love. There are no walls which can keep him out. How often do we put up with our own "walls" of fear, doubt, anger, and sadness? We lock ourselves into a room of our own making. We may try to work our way out ourselves, or we may not even try. Jesus will come to us like he did to his disciples.

The first thing Jesus says to his disciples is, "Peace be with you." This greeting meant even more than "do not be afraid". In Jesus' time it meant "May God give you every good thing." Jesus came to prepare them to make that happen – to make his Kingdom real.

Staying together in fear wouldn't be a very good witness to the outside world. Who would want to join a group of trembling and fearful disciples? What made the difference is that Jesus came into their midst, not with words of reproof for their past failures, but with words of reconciliation, "Peace be with you." The past was over.

But what about the future? It was obvious from past performance on their own that these disciples didn't have what it would take to leave the locked room and go out into the dangerous world. He came to them to prepare them for what they were to do with their faith and belief in him, and how salvation would be lived by people who followed him into a new life.

Jesus instructed the disciples to go out and to do what he had been doing. He said to them, "As the father has sent me, so I send you." But Jesus doesn't send them out on their own. He knew their fears and their weaknesses. He gave them the Holy Spirit. Jesus breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

This action recalls another significant time in human history when breathing life into people is described. In the second chapter of Genesis, the creation story, we are told "The Lord God breathed into (Adam's) nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." Jesus is now breathing new life into his disciples. They will never be the same. Their witness will soon bring new life, the Kingdom of God, to the world.

As we gather for prayer today, we can think of ourselves as the modern equivalent of those upper-room disciples. For a short time today, like them, we are together in a room. We bring here our past sins and shortcomings, and we receive Jesus' words of reconciliation. We hear Jesus' words, spoken by our friends at the exchange of peace, "Peace be with you".

Our liturgy is intentional in this action. This exchange of peace has been part of the liturgy since the early church. It is that important. This is not some casual greeting time. We repeat and renew the words of Jesus to his friends. We have the power to be the conduit of peace from

Jesus to those here with us. Think about that. We are reliving the experience of Jesus and his disciples.

We are the “blessed”, the ones Jesus was talking about when he spoke to Thomas, and he said: “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” See how this all fits together? Our liturgy is based on many traditions and rituals of the early church. We are reliving, repeating, the words and signs of Jesus. We learn from his actions and deeds. We are called to be the modern disciples and we are here, in this room, to get prepared. This is sacred space, friends, and we need to fully understand and participate in this worship.

As we listen to the Gospel stories, we not only hear good news for ourselves. We are to share our gifts with others. Salvation is not solely a personal event. How do we do that? We get our instructions from Jesus. “As the father has sent me, so I send you,” He says. We are to do what he did.

Believe it or not, instructions on ministry are also found in our Book of Common Prayer. At page 855 we find the following:

Who are the ministers of the church? The ministers of the church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons. What is the ministry of the laity? 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.

That sounds like our church believes Jesus was also speaking to us, and not only to his first disciples, doesn’t it?

That does not mean we need to get up on a soap box in Centennial Park downtown and shout out Bible verses, or that we stand up in front

of people at our community centers and preach or speak at gatherings in our independent living facilities. Yet we all have friends, neighbors and family members who do not go to church. Or who have stopped going to church. By going to church we send a message to them. We can take a risk and invite them to come to church with us. We could invite them to come with us to Bible Study.

People were attracted to the early church because of the love and concern they saw expressed by the disciples and Jesus' followers. People are still attracted to those who show love and mercy. Each of us, and our community at Good Shepherd, is that message. The way we live our lives matters. Our example and our invitation matter. One of the many inspiring quotes attributed to St. Francis is this: "Start by doing what is necessary, and then what is possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible."

When we leave here, we shall go out and, with our words and how we live in community, we will spread the news of the new Kingdom Jesus has established. Like the disciples, Jesus doesn't send us out on our own. He has given us the Holy Spirit in Baptism. And before we leave this room, our "Upper Room", we will be nourished for the tasks that await us. We will be nourished by the body of Christ himself.

Listen carefully as Jesus speaks to you those reassuring and encouraging words he first spoke to his disciples: "As the father has sent me, so I send you."

"Peace be with you."