

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 15th, 2018
8th Sunday after Pentecost: The Jesus Pyramid Scheme
Rev. John Crow

Amos 7:7-15
Psalm 85
Ephesians 1:1-14
Mark 6:7-13

When I first left active duty, I was recruited into what some people would call a pyramid scheme. Its name was Primerica, and through them, I spent the better part of two years selling mutual funds, term life insurance, and home refinance loans, all while recruiting and training a team to work under me. If you have any experience with this sort of thing, you know that it is technically called “multi-level marketing”, which is different from an illegal pyramid scheme, but the term *pyramid scheme* is easier to grasp because we all know what a pyramid looks like: big wide base, with very little room at the top. You likely haven’t heard of Primerica, but I’m sure you have heard of companies such as Amway, Mary Kay, Pampered Chef, or Herbalife, all of which follow the same basic recruiting structure. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not bashing this business model. In fact, I think it’s a pretty good picture of how discipleship works.

Last week we focused on the identity of Jesus, and how that impacts our response when ministry flops, based on Mark 6:1-6. Today, we pick up right where we left off, focusing on Jesus' model of disciple-making, and the lessons it has for us today. First, let's focus on the overall methodology that Jesus used to turn a bunch of uneducated oddballs into the leaders of His worldwide church. Jesus would have made a good Army trainer, because He followed the Army methodology perfectly. It's called "crawl, walk, run." The *crawl* phase started when Jesus first called the disciples. They were to be *with* Him. And that's pretty much what they did. They watched and learned from Jesus' teaching and His personal example. But they knew they wouldn't always just be watching, because they were called to eventually lead others to Christ, as Mark described in chapter three, verse 14. In other words, they knew the *crawl* phase was preparing them for greater challenges to come.

The *walk* phase is what we read about today in Mark six, starting at verse seven. The disciples are no longer just learning; now they are doing—but not without a safety net of sorts. Jesus sends the disciples out to carry on His ministry in His name, but only for a short time, and with the assistance of a coworker. When they finished this ministry assignment, they were to meet back with Jesus and process the whole experience. This is a major shift in Jesus' ministry, since it marks the

beginning of the disciples really taking on ministry of their own. In purely human terms, it is a big change because instead of the ministry happening in the one town where Jesus is, it is now happening in six towns at once! This is a major ministry expansion. The *run* phase was yet to come. For more details, read the book of Acts.

Now that we understand the overall methodology Jesus was using to develop disciples, we should understand what it was they were commissioned to do. This story in Mark reveals three missional tasks performed by the disciples: Teaching, healing, and driving out demons. In other words, they were about what Jesus was about: the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. In fact, Matthew's gospel records Jesus telling the disciples to preach, "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (10:7), just as He had been doing. Interestingly enough, that's the same thing disciples should be doing today. Like a very long train pulling into a station, the Kingdom of God is still arriving today, but hasn't yet stopped. So we are still called to the dual mission of witnessing to the Kingdom of God, and being instrumental in bringing it about. That still includes teaching, and at times, healing, and even driving out demons. In case this is news to you, no, demons didn't just retire after the ascension. While we don't typically see demon activity in the US today (or maybe we just don't recognize it as such), it is still common in some parts of the

world. In fact, the Catholic Church has had to increase its staff of priests in the Philippines who are gifted at driving out demons. While we are all called to be disciples, we are not all called to be spiritual healers or exorcists—these are special gifts.

The last area that clearly stands out in this *pericope* (which is a fancy, seminary term for “short story”) is what to rely upon, or not rely upon in ministry. This stems from the instructions Jesus gave before sending out the disciples. First, they are to go in pairs. This has the advantage of meeting the requirements under mosaic law for two or more to make a reliable witness (Deuteronomy 17:6). Also, Jesus recognized that He was sending his disciples into what was possibly hostile territory, so having someone they could trust and receive mutual support from would be vital. I think this still applies today. In ministry, there are no lone rangers. We should rely upon the support of other mature Christians, even if it is remotely through prayer. The need for support is true in all human endeavors, and we carry that with us into ministry.

Next, we should not rely upon material means. Jesus gave very strict rules for what the disciples were to leave behind when they went. We need to be careful

here, because we must distinguish between what is universal, and what is specific to the conditions of that time and place. I feel pretty confident that missionaries today should travel with more than just sandals and a single coat, particularly if going somewhere like Siberia. But it gets more difficult when considering how much financial support or material needs should be covered. Most missionary organizations require their missionaries to raise support from friends and family to fund their missionary effort. Other organizations will fund the whole thing, but for obvious reasons are limited in the number of missionaries they will accept. Ministry is about reliance on God's provision, not the security of worldly means. Material security may work against the faith that is necessary for successful ministry. Not all ministry is the same, so I don't think there is a prescriptive rule beyond obedience to what the Holy Spirit is leading one to do regarding financial means for ministry. In fact, the greater issue is probably not the amount of financial means one has in ministry, but one's attitude towards it.

What is clear is that Jesus gave the disciples very strict limitations on what to take with them, causing them to rely entirely on God's provision for food and shelter. They couldn't even take with them what is known as a "beggar's bag" to keep food for another day. Like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, they were daily constrained to rely upon God through the generosity of others for the very basics of

survival. They may have had some very unpleasant days. Jesus told them to shake the dust off their sandals if any town rejected them, which may very well have happened. That would also have meant no provisions, so they probably were quite hungry by the time they reached the next town.

The last thing the disciples were not to rely upon for success in ministry is their own gifts and abilities. Simply put, their success or failure in any given town was not based upon their speaking ability, or anything else they personally brought to the table. Their success was based on the working of the Holy Spirit. If you have doubts about this, please review last week's sermon. This concept is found in today's reading in one simple instruction from Jesus: to shake off the dust from any town that rejects them. Interestingly, all three synoptic gospels include these instructions. It was a well-known Jewish tradition to shake off the dust of a foreign land when stepping foot in Israel so as to avoid "contaminating" the Promised Land. If we apply that idea here, it would seem that the disciples are to avoid contaminating the rest of Israel by the soil of an unbelieving town. As Jesus said in verse eleven, it symbolized leaving the people of that town to their fate.

Let me be clear: I *do not* believe Jesus was giving up on those who initially rejected the news of the Kingdom. If anything, He is *very* patient. I think the symbolic act of shaking the dust off their sandals held a message both for the town they left, and for the disciples themselves. To the people of that town, it communicated that they were now on the wrong side of God's plan. To the disciples themselves, it communicated that they had done what Jesus had asked of them, so they were not to worry about disappointing results. In other words, it was an emotional reset. It's like an Olympic figure skater who has to get her focus back on her routine after a bad fall. The shaking of the dust off the disciples' sandals is a physical reminder that what had just happened is over, and now they are starting something new. If they remember that they are ministering in Christ's name, not by their own abilities, then they really have nothing to feel bad about when things don't go their way. Success isn't up to them.

And I don't want to leave you hanging. Even though I know it's part of next week's gospel reading, I'm sure you are on the edge of your seats, wondering how the mission went. Did it flop, like Jesus seemed to in Nazareth? Did the disciples come back having shaken lots of dust off their sandals? Well verse 13 clues us in that they were successful, at least in driving out demons and in healing. Verse 31 also tells us that they were so busy when they came back to Jesus that they didn't

even have time to eat because there were so many people wanting their help. Talk about a thriving ministry! I'll just mention something extra here; don't worry, it's free. Jesus had an answer to this situation, which is also recorded in verse 31. He told the disciples to get away and rest. It sounds like Jesus was prescribing a time of sabbatical for over-worked ministers. I believe this results from the larger truth that ministry stems from an out-pouring of the minister's spiritual life. If the minister isn't spiritually connected and emotionally healthy, then all that's left for his flock is a dry riverbed, instead of the flowing torrent that should be there. This truth has direct implications for disciple-making, as we discussed earlier.

Today's pericope (there's that word again) in Mark has a lot of wisdom for us today when it comes to disciple-making, and we better pay attention. One, because it comes straight from Jesus, the master disciple-maker; and two, because disciple-making is the most appropriate form of ministry today. It worked for Jesus; it worked for John Wesley; and it works today as a superior model to any other for fulfilling the great commission. We see in this short passage the model Jesus used of crawl, walk, run. We saw the activities that disciples are to be about—namely witnessing to and bringing about the Kingdom of God. Lastly, we saw that we should rely upon the emotional and prayer support of other mature Christians, as

well as God's provision for our needs, but not upon our own gifts and abilities for successful ministry.

Now comes the part for some honest introspection. I assume that because you are here this morning, you are part of Jesus' huge pyramid scheme, with who knows how many saints above you. The question is, will there be countless saints below you? Are you actively discipling someone? If you are a parent, then hopefully you have at a minimum disciplined your children. But what about others? If you feel like you don't know how to disciple someone, then please ask me, or someone else who can guide you in the process of disciple-making. As I said earlier, disciple-making is for everyone, though it can look very different from one situation to the next. Probably many here have done some discipling at one point or another online instead of in person. Some disciple-making may be more sporadic, while others are very regular. It is also important to recognize that some disciple-making brings people to a saving faith in Christ, while others brings a baby Christian into spiritual maturity. All of it is good and necessary.

As we prepare to receive the Eucharist today, I pray that we will all feel the burden of the empty seats around us, knowing that there are future disciples in our

community who are not worshipping God today. I pray that the Holy Spirit will kindle a fire in each of our hearts for a particular person whom we can disciple—and no matter how uncomfortable that fire may be, I pray it continues to burn until each of us has been faithful to disciple the person on our hearts. The grace of God offered in the Eucharist is powerful. Let us carry it forth, so that the Jesus pyramid scheme won't end with us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.