

“Who We Are”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
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Matthew 10:1-14

... Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.

My first semester at seminary I had to write a spiritual autobiography. All except the youngest among us have read autobiographies – life stories written by that person. A spiritual autobiography, though, is the story of how God has been present and active through your life. If it includes significant events, people and places that have influenced your relationship with God, what would you write? What places, what moments, months or year, what people have shaped you spiritually? Where and when has God as Spirit touched your life? And, how did you respond? In what ways did that experience change the way you live? Or didn’t it?

I did not know much about spiritual matters when I started seminary, so I started my thinking with the usual identifiers. I’m a mother, a daughter, a sister. I’m a teacher, a student, a leader, a musician. I am a follower of Christ. Finally I came up with my first sentence: “I am a child of God.” Though many had used the words before, I felt inspired – and I’ve used the phrase many times since then. Before anything else, I am a child of God.

I still had three pages to write. I filled them with excerpts from my story – of family and home, Sunday school and youth group, choir and handbells. I wrote about my God-moment as an adolescent. And about my escape from the Eastern megalopolis after college to teach in Navajoland and how that changed my experience of neighbor and God, and about my search for where God was leading me 20 years ago.

Jesus’ first disciples never had to do this, which is probably good since most of them were illiterate. But a few NT writers paint word pictures for us. I read last week that if you want to remember something, the best way is to draw a picture. There’s space in your bulletin for just that, or words if you prefer.

Many of us stumble along in our discipleship. We accept God into our hearts but not into our daily lives. We call Jesus Lord or Savior but we don't become disciples. Today's lesson reminds us that Jesus expected more. Matthew writes that Jesus' mission for his disciples is to continue in the work that he did. Jesus gives those first disciples then, and us now, his authority – to live as he lived, teach as he taught, heal and make whole as he did, and live as if God's kin-dom is near.

On the last page of Matthew's gospel we read, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

Nowhere does it say, "It's okay, you can stop now." There's no expiration date. Disciples are given Christ's authority so that we can lead lives of compassion and justice for all God's creation. Today, tomorrow and for every tomorrow after that. You are here today because you are at least open to the possibility that this is God's call in your life.

Thank God that, along with Christ's authority, God equips us with other things, whatever it is that we need in order to work together toward God's intention. To live with others, we're given patience, though if you're like me you need a lot of practice. To care about the woman who's in jail simply because she's cannot afford court fees or the man who never intended to become addicted to his pain meds, God gives us a sense of compassion and justice. But again, to be useful, they need to be exercised. There are other gifts and we'll talk about some of them next week. For now, I want to talk about the ways we use our gifts, talents and skills.

Have you ever noticed that certain people are great at thinking up new ideas while others are not? Or that some people can take that person's idea and shape it to exactly fit their context? And that others don't really deal with ideas but will work hard on whatever task is at hand? This was one of my learnings at the MCCI clergy meeting this week.

If there was a project at church, which one would you be? Do you come ready to roll up your sleeves and get to work? Are you one of those who come up with the new ideas? Or do you look at others' ideas and say, this would work for us with a little tweaking? Apparently, we generally fall into one of these groups.

Another learning is about three ways we all approach ministry... There are those among us who recognize the direction God is leading us. They point the way and are ready to start heading that direction. These are the Vision Criers among us.

There are others who will point out God's action in that vision. They can tell us why this is God's direction for us. These are Spiritual Shepherds and they can explain where God is in the venture we're on, or are considering.

Some people are more focused on what we need to do in order to head out into God's future. These Systems/Tasks Organizers the planners, the "How-to" people.

In a church, we need all three types of mindsets. We can get impatient with folks who don't share our mindset; we wonder what they're thinking. Yet we need people who offer each of these perspectives. Knowing this helps us to be patient with those others and even to seek out their feedback.

I remember when we'd go camping in Girl Scouts. How I dreaded the evenings when we'd plan out who would bring what, which groups would be in charge of which meals. I'm a vision crier; I'm ready to go! But it went smoother with planning and preparation.

We need all three voices in our church as well as in our UMW, in Ministries Council, and in all of our groups. When even one voice is absent, we experience logjam. We get stuck and, even if we want to, we struggle to move forward. When all three voices are present though, we can do great ministry.

We *want* to follow God's lead. We *need* to step out into God's vision for First Church. But we need everyone to do it. So today, I'm challenging you to find your primary ministry components. Many of our committees and ministry teams have already done this. We've discovered that some groups are heavy in the Systems/Tasks Organizers. They get the job done. But without Vision Criers and Spiritual Shepherds, they struggle to know what God is calling us to do.

(Get to work.)

Between us we have what we need. And God calls us to be about kin-dom building.

Amen.