

## **Out Into The World: Challenges Facing Christians**

(Numbers 11:21-31; Mark 9:38-42; Romans 12:16-21)

Parents often talk about preparing their children to go "out into the world." It's a tough job, nowadays, isn't it? There are all sorts of challenges that face our young people today in the world.

We see the same thing happening on the pages of our Bibles. We see God always working to prepare his children to go "out into the world," to face the challenges that he knows we will encounter there. We see this preparation for going out into the world happening in our Older Testament lesson for today. Moses and the Israelites had left Egypt and were venturing out into the world. And one of the first challenges that faced them was trust in God. Thus Moses said to God, "There are more than 600,000 of us. How can we possibly find enough food for all of us to eat each and every day?" And God's response was, "Is the Lord's power limited?" To prove that it isn't, the Lord sent manna and quail daily for 40 years!

And right after this trust challenge, there arose another challenge. This was the challenge of how to get everything done that needed to be done. God made it clear that one man couldn't do all that needed to be done--that one man didn't need to do it all--that one man wasn't suppose to do it all. So the people gathered 70 elders and placed them all around the sanctuary, and the Lord came down in a cloud and took some of Moses' spirit and placed it on the 70 elders, thus equipping them to do some of the work of the community of faith.

But a third challenge then arose. It seems that God sent his spirit to two men who hadn't been chosen by the congregation. These two men, named Eldad and Medad, began speaking up, talking about God and prophesying about what God wanted the people to do. And Moses' assistant, Joshua, didn't think this was right. After all, they hadn't been among those chosen by the congregation. They hadn't gone through the proper channels. So Joshua went to Moses and said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" But Moses said, "Are you jealous for my sake? Don't be. It'd be wonderful if everyone would be so touched by God's spirit!"

This same challenge arose when Jesus was preparing his disciples to go out into the world. Jesus' disciple John went to him, just as Joshua had gone to Moses, complaining that someone was casting out demons in Jesus' name.

Now, it was believed at this time and in this place that evil spirits caused both mental and physical illness. But these evil spirits could be exorcized, driven out of a person, if the healer used against these spirits of possession the name of a more powerful spirit. Thus, John had seen someone trying to get rid of an evil spirit by using the powerful name of Jesus. But the person doing this wasn't one of Jesus' disciples.

John added, "We tried to stop him, because he was not following us"--because he isn't one of us! John and the other disciples wanted Jesus to affirm them as his only representatives. They, like too many people today, had a narrow definition of who the real followers of Jesus are. But Jesus tried to expand their definition of what it means to follow him. He wanted his disciples to accept people who didn't express their faith in the same way that they did. Thus Jesus met this challenge of diversity just as Moses did: with tolerance.

Jesus answered, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." What a blow for the disciples' egos.

In his commentary on Jesus' words, William Barclay makes two points. The first is that "there is far more than one way to God. 'God,' as Tennyson has it, 'fulfills himself in many ways.' Cervantes once said, 'Many are the roads by which God carries his own to heaven.' The world is round, and two people can get to precisely the same destination by starting out in precisely opposite directions. All roads, if we pursue them long enough and far enough, lead to God. It is a fearful thing for any man or any church to think that he or it has a monopoly of salvation.

(And the second point that Barclay makes is that...) It is necessary to remember that truth is always bigger than any man's grasp of it. No man can possibly grasp all truth. The basis of tolerance is not a lazy acceptance of anything. It is not the feeling that there cannot be assurance anywhere. The basis of tolerance is simply the realization of the magnitude of the orb of truth. John Morley wrote, 'Toleration means reverence for all the possibilities of truth, it means acknowledgment that (truth) she dwells in divers mansions, and wears vesture of many colors, and speaks in strange tongues. It means frank respect for freedom of indwelling conscience against mechanical forms, official conventions, social force. It means the charity that is greater than faith or hope.' Intolerance is a sign both of arrogance and ignorance, for it is a sign that a man believes that there is no truth beyond the truth he sees."<sup>1</sup>

In early September, we started "Living The Questions." We talked about journeying--how we are on different paths to reach the same destination--our same God. At that point, those were just words. But in the past two months, we've seen what this means. We've seen good people, brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow members of our church family, who believe differently than we do.

As a result, perhaps at times during these two months, we've found ourselves thinking that it would be less confusing to be in an all-conservative congregation....or in an all-liberal congregation. But, friends, this would be a mistake. There are a lot of things I freely admit that I don't know, but one thing I do know is that the most Christ-like churches are churches in which the congregation is different but respectful of one another. Let me say this again. The most Christ-like churches are churches in which the congregation is different but respectful of one another. I know this is true because I have felt Christ's affirming presence in situations of diversity and tolerance and because of our scripture lessons for today and because of the diversity of those Jesus chose to become the basis for the church. What a different group of people Jesus chose to be his disciples! He chose for his disciples people who were "all over the board" in terms of their backgrounds and their beliefs!

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, William, "A Lesson In Tolerance; Mark 9:38-40," The Gospel of Mark, The Daily Bible Studies Series.

Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen. There's a good possibility that Philip, with his Greek name, had ties to the Gentiles. After all, it was Philip that the Gentile Greeks approached when they had questions about Jesus. Then there was Matthew, a tax collector. Tax collecting was a disrespected way of earning a living in Jesus' day. Tax collectors were considered so dishonest that they weren't allowed to testify in court. Finally, there's a good chance that Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot were both political activists who wanted to use violence to overthrow the Roman government. Then to this already-very-different inner core, Jesus added more diversity--sinners; women; prostitutes.

Yes, Jesus' ideal community, the community he gathered around himself, was a community of tremendous diversity--a group that had to be tolerant of one another to stay together! At times we get hints of the differences, such as when Peter didn't want Jesus to go to Jerusalem and be martyred, or when James and John wanted to have the places of greatest honor, or when Thomas didn't hang with the rest of them after Jesus' death. Never did Jesus, however, say, "Peter, if you think it'd be better to do it a difference way, go find a group that believes the way you believe or start your own group." Nor did Jesus say, "James and John, if you're looking for something other than living your lives as servants, you don't belong in my movement," or "Thomas, if you can't be faithful to this community, you need to go elsewhere." Always, Jesus tolerantly, patiently, lovingly kept his disciples with all their differences together.

We today face the same challenges that the people of God have faced not only in Bible days but throughout the ages.

First, it's a challenge in our world today, in our economy today, to trust God. And yet, many of you who have seen your incomes greatly cut due to interest rates and others of you who have lost your jobs, have testified that when you continue to live and even give as Jesus' disciples, God somehow provides the "manna and quail" you need.

Second, it's a challenge in our world today to do the Lord's work. We live in times when we're confronted with countless choices of how we can spend our time. But the ministry or work of God is something which belongs to the whole people of God, all baptized Christians. God has called each one of us

to be his servants in the world. He has given each one of us time, talents, abilities, and money to use in his service. Here at HMCCC, we get this. That's why if you look at your bulletin, under Church Staff, it says that the ministers are "all the members of this church." When I came to the Ham and Bean Dinner yesterday, I was impressed with all the women wearing aprons, who had unselfishly come to cook, greet, and serve others--to raise funds to do ministry in the coming year. And when I see many of you who are already working two jobs or having health problems step up and allow the spirit of God to fall upon you and lead you in the working hard for the ministries of the Circles, I know that you have embraced the challenge of sharing the ministries of the church--the ministries of Jesus.

Third, it's a challenge in our world today to accept that there are ways to God other than our way and to choose to willingly be in loving, respectful relationship with those who are different from us. But Jesus said, "For truly I tell you whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward." This seems to indicate that for Jesus, "the proof is in the pudding." Our loving actions toward one another are more important to Jesus than our points of doctrine.

There are all sorts of challenges facing us as Christians as we seek to live in the world. But they're challenges God has prepared us for, and they're challenges that we here at Hickman Mills Community Christian Church are embracing--as we trust God, work for God, and live as an authentic Christian community, loving and respecting one another, along with our differences. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; November 8, 2009