



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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He Sent Them Out

Luke 9:1-17

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A few weeks ago an oxygen sensor in Veronica's car went bad. I looked up the necessary information online and decided that replacing it was easy enough that I'd save some money and do it myself. I read through the instructions and then dove under the hood. It was simple. Step One: Unscrew the old sensor. Step Two: Unplug the wire connector. Step Three: Follow Step One and Step Two in reverse to put in the new sensor. Easy. Unless you've never done it before. I fought with the wire connector for twenty minutes. It sounded easy. And it was easy—once you'd done it and had found the hidden clip inexplicably located on the bottom of the connector in a place impossible to see. The instructions didn't say anything about that—they just said to disconnect it. Of course, once I'd done the job, I knew. Now I could do it again in just a few minutes—because I *learned by doing*.

Think about that. One of the best ways we learn is by doing. Alexandra just got her learner's permit. We have learner's permits because we know that you learn to drive by driving yourself. It's not enough to read a book, take a test, and then to hop into a car and drive. We learn by doing. We make mistakes and learn from them. We have to figure things out for ourselves—like the hidden clip on that sensor connector—but because we've gone through the experience we learn and remember and grow.

Now think about this in terms of the kingdom of God. One of the most amazing things about the kingdom is that God invites us to help him with his work. That's wonderful when you

think about it. It's important work. It's the work of eternity. It's work that involves the eternal destinies of souls in this world. It's work so important that God came himself to do it, incarnate in Jesus. And yet he still calls us and invites us to work along side him. And while he's given us the Scriptures to teach us, he also invites us to learn by doing. It's a remarkable thing. I've known some people who are very well educated and have spent their lives studying the intricacies of the Bible and pondering theology, but because they've never *done* it they're often practically useless for the kingdom. On the other hand, however, I've met some people who have never read a theology book, have never had any interest in deep thoughts about the Trinity or the Incarnation, they read their Bibles on what some people might think of as a "simple" level, but they *do* and because they *do*, they have understanding and insight into the kingdom and into Jesus that other people will never have.

This morning we'll begin looking at Chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel. Where Chapter 8 was about response to Jesus, Chapter 9 is about who Jesus is and what it means to be his disciple. It's about learning by doing. And it's, again, a remarkable thing. God wants us to know his Son—who he is and what he's about—and what we see here in Luke's Gospel is that it's impossible to truly know Jesus apart from following him and helping with his work as disciples. But we also see that it's impossible to truly be one of Jesus' disciples without knowing who he is. The two feed each other. The better we know Jesus, the better disciples we'll be and the better disciples we are—the more closely we follow and the more experience we have doing kingdom work—the better we'll know Jesus. Following deepens our knowledge and knowledge deepens our following. We learn by doing.

And so Chapter 9 begins with Jesus calling his disciples. They need to

learn. As we've seen, they have faith and they trust, but their faith is often weak and it's often weak because they don't have as strong a sense or as strong an understanding as they should about Jesus and who he is. They panicked in the storm and then when Jesus calmed the storm—something only God could do—they were afraid and confused. They need to go from the textbook to the lab, so to speak. They need to get their hands dirty in Jesus' work. Look at verses 1-2:

And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.

Jesus had called Peter and his friends, saying that they would be fishers of men, but so far the disciples have been watching as Jesus does the fishing. Now he calls them to join in. Notice that he gives them "power and authority". Jesus himself had power and authority. The people commented on this back in 4:36 when he cast out a demon. Jesus has been teaching about God's kingdom breaking into the world, but he's also been performing miracles—healings and exorcisms—to *show* that it's not just talk. Humanity has been subject to the devil and the hallmarks of his kingdom are sin and death. And so Jesus has been assaulting sin and death. He has power and authority over the devil and his demons and he has power and authority over sickness and death. And now he extends that power and authority to the disciples and sends them out as agents of the new kingdom. And as they go out to proclaim the kingdom, just like Jesus, they'll be able to back up their talk with actions that show the power the new kingdom has over sin and death.

And notice that Luke makes special note that Jesus called and sent the *twelve*. We're reminded what this new kingdom is. Again, twelve was an important number. Israel had had twelve fathers and descended from

those fathers—those sons of Jacob—were the twelve tribes. Israel was called to carry God’s good news to the nations, but instead she kept it to herself and let her light grow dim. And so God sent his Son to be born a Jew and to take up, himself, the failed mission of his people. Jesus embodies Israel. He’s the culmination of Israel’s history. But where the old Israel was faithless, the new Israel is faithful. We see this in Jesus as he fulfils Israel’s mission of taking the good news to the world. And here he calls twelve new fathers—his disciples—to proclaim the good news alongside him. This is the core of the new kingdom and of the new Israel and it’s breaking into the world, confronting sin and death.

But Jesus doesn’t just send them out. He gives them some specific instructions:

And he said to them, “Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics. And whatever house you enter, stay there, and from there depart. And wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them.” And they departed and went through the villages, preaching the gospel and healing everywhere. (Luke 9:3-6)

Jesus’ first instruction is for them to take nothing. They’re to go out just as he went out. They’ll be received—or rejected—just as he was, and that makes this a venture of faith. God has provided for Jesus’ ministry so far—we saw this at the beginning of Chapter 8—and now he calls his disciples to exercise the same kind of faith he has. This is “learning faith” by “doing faith”. Faith can’t be choked out by worldly cares and riches or by the pleasures of life if those things are rejected from the start. Friends, Jesus makes an important point here: We’ll never learn to walk

by faith if we hold onto our fallbacks. One reason why our faith as wealthy Westerners is so weak is without doubt because we are so seldom forced to walk by faith alone. Compared to most people, we’re well-fed, we’re rich, and we not only have two tunics, but we’ve got closets full of clothes we never even wear and all these things choke out our seedling faith. Faith is God’s gift to us, but we can’t cultivate that faith *and* worldly cares and riches at the same time.

Jesus’ second instruction about staying in whatever house they were to enter is probably aimed at not offending hospitality. If the poorest person in town responds in faith to the disciple’s message and offers him hospitality and then a few days later the wealthiest person in town responds and does the same, the disciple should honour the first. The kingdom of God is not about climbing a ladder to success or looking for worldly comforts at the expense of God’s people.

Third, Jesus tells the disciples that where they are not received, they are to shake the dust of that town off their feet as a testimony against them. This is significant in ways we might not understand without knowing something about that culture. For the Jew, gentile territory was unclean, and so when a Jew left gentile territory he would shake the dust from his feet to avoid carrying that uncleanness into Jewish territory. It carried over to the temple as well. The temple was a place of cleanness and a pious Jew would shake the worldly dust from his feet before entering that holy place. It was about their understanding of the kingdom and about God’s presence. Nothing unclean or unholy belonged in Israel and especially not in the temple. But in this case Jesus doesn’t tell the disciples to shake the dust from their feet to keep themselves clean. No, he tells them to do this as a testimony to the towns that reject Jesus. It’s to send a message to those

who reject Christ that they are unclean. The Jews thought of themselves as embodying God’s kingdom. They were his chosen people. They were clean and on the inside; everyone else was unclean and on the outside and to unclean was to apart from and rejected by God. But Jesus reminds us that he’s come to establish a *new* kingdom. He has become Israel himself and the only way to be part of the new Israel is through Jesus—by reorienting your life around him in faith. To reject Jesus is to be left on the outside and to be left unclean—to no longer be the people of God. The new kingdom has nothing to do with ethnicity; it has everything to do with Jesus.

Luke tells us that the disciples went through the villages doing as Jesus had told them. This attracted the attention of Herod. Look at verses 7-9:

Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen. Herod said, “John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?” And he sought to see him.

Herod had heard about Jesus. People were saying that John or Elijah had been raised from the dead, which highlights just how much Jesus was carrying on the ministry of the prophets. This is also the first time we hear in Luke’s gospel that John has been executed. That doesn’t bode well for Jesus if he’s carrying on where John left off. We can guess that if he keeps his ministry up he’s going to run afoul of Herod too. When it was just Jesus, Herod wasn’t so concerned. Jesus was just one man. But Luke tells us this in the context of Jesus sending out his disciples. Now there are twelve going out and spreading Jesus’ message. They’re

confronting the old kingdom and the status quo and that's not good for Herod. Trouble lies ahead.

But for now Luke brings us back to Jesus as he gathers the disciples so that they can give their reports. Look at verses 10-11:

On their return the apostles told him all that they had done. And he took them and withdrew apart to a town called Bethsaida. When the crowds learned it, they followed him, and he welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing.

They told him all they had done. Luke uses the same sort of language to describe the disciples' activities as he does those of Jesus. He really had given them power and authority and it enabled them to go out and do themselves the things he had been doing. We can imagine how excited they were to report back. And so Jesus, Luke says, withdrew with them to Bethsaida. For Luke that usually means for a time of private prayer and teaching. But word gets out and pretty soon crowds of people have gathered and Jesus takes the opportunity to preach to these people about the kingdom and to heal those who were sick. This all went very well until it started getting late in the day.

Now the day began to wear away, and the twelve came and said to him, "Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place." But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." They said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish— unless we are to go and buy food for all these people." For there were about five thousand men. (Luke 9:12-14a)

There's nothing wrong with what the disciples do here. People hadn't eaten all day and now it's getting late. Maybe Jesus was so involved in what he was doing that he hadn't noticed and so the disciples suggest that maybe it's time to send the crowds to find food and place to stay before dark. It was common sense. But Jesus takes advantage of it. He gives the disciples another test. They'd just come back from having travelled around Galilee preaching the good news of the kingdom. They had gone out with nothing and God had provided for them. That was part of what they'd been so excited to report back to Jesus. And so now, with a crowd of people in the middle of nowhere, Jesus picks up right where they left off: "We don't need to send them away. Why don't you guys give them something to eat?" And they think he's joking. "Right, Jesus. We've got five loaves of bread and two fish. We can't feed all these people. There are five thousand men alone, not counting the women and children. It's not possible. We could go buy some food. Oh, wait. No, we can't, because you told us not take any money with us!"

They don't clue into the connection between this part of Jesus ministry and the part of Jesus ministry they had just accomplished with God's provision. They forget who's telling them to feed the crowd. This is Jesus, the one who filled their nets with that enormous catch of fish that almost swamped their boats. This is Jesus, who represents the same God who miraculously fed his people in the wilderness for forty years. The disciples were willing to walk in faith when the stakes were small, but now they doubt—in fact it doesn't even occur to them to approach this problem with faith—when the stakes are high. They trusted God to take care of them as individuals, but it doesn't even occur to them that God can take care of this crowd of thousands.

The disciples need their faith taken to a deeper level. And how do we learn? We learn by doing. Look at what Jesus does in verses 14-17:

And he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each." And they did so, and had them all sit down. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing over them. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And they all ate and were satisfied. And what was left over was picked up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.

It didn't even occur to them that these hungry people could be fed by Jesus so simply. Jesus just takes the bread and the fish, blesses them as the head of the household would have done at any meal, and starts handing pieces to the disciples to give to the crowd—and the bread and fish just keep coming and coming and coming. There wasn't a hungry person left.

Imagine how the disciples' faith was grown as they carried basket after basket after basket of food out to the waiting crowd. No doubt some of them were remembering the great draught of fish and wondering why it hadn't occurred to them that Jesus could feed these people so easily. This was a faith-building experience. But remember that as we walk in obedience to Jesus we not only become better disciples, we also get to know him better. The meal wasn't just a way to show the disciples what Jesus was capable of doing. Everything about the meal highlights who Jesus is and what his kingdom is about.

Luke makes a point of telling us that they were in a desolate place and in doing that he makes a connection between Jesus leading these people to this desert-like spot and the Lord leading the Israelites out of Egypt an

into the wilderness of Sinai. Jesus has come to lead his people in a new exodus, not from slavery to earthly masters, but from our slavery to sin. And as the Lord miraculously fed his people during that first exodus, Jesus now feeds these thousands of people who have followed him into the wilderness. Jesus is forming a new Israel and he will feed all who follow where he leads. This is a foreshadowing of the great heavenly banquet that waits for God's people the other side of eternity. It's a symbol of the bountiful goodness of God found by all those who come to know and to trust in Jesus the Messiah.

But while we're talking about banquets, there's something else important here. It's something we won't notice at first glance from our perspective. Meals and food don't have the significance for us that they did for Jews. We eat what we want, how we want, with whomever we want. But remember that what and how Jews ate were governed by ritual purity laws. They only ate clean food and that only ate it when it was prepared and handled the proper way. The tables and dishes and utensils had to be prepared. And most of all, they didn't eat with gentiles or people who were unclean. These food-related rules were so important that by Jesus' time they had become one of the most important ways that the Jews identified themselves and set boundaries. Insiders—God's people—ate one way; outsiders ate another way—and they *never* ate together.

So notice that there's no concern here for any of that. Luke doesn't tell us where the food came from. Jesus shows no concern for how it was prepared or whether or not the proper tithes were paid on it. There's no water for washing or purification. And the crowd simply sits down together to eat with no concern about who is clean and who is unclean.

Jesus simply blesses the food and feeds the people. The typical Jewish meal was about setting kingdom boundaries. And now Jesus prepares this miraculous meal and he brushes all the boundaries aside. Everyone is welcome so long as they come to him in faith as these people did. Nothing else matters, only Jesus. Jesus himself makes all things clean.

And, finally, we're reminded that as Jesus did all this, he was doing it first and foremost for his disciples—for the twelve fathers of this new Israel. The meal began with twelve doubters. The meal ends with twelve baskets full of leftovers—one basket for each of them. Picture them each carrying a basket around the crowd, gathering up the leftover food, and all of them coming back to Jesus and there they stand, each with a full basket of bread. Jesus couldn't make it any clearer. Now, how are they going to respond? The next time they need to step out in faith, they're going to remember those baskets full of bread. They've learned by doing.

Brothers and sisters, how do we respond when Jesus calls us to walk in faith? Do we doubt? How often, like the disciples, does it not even occur to us to approach our problems and to approach life from the standpoint of faith? It didn't even occur to the disciples that Jesus could feed the crowd. There are lot of times—maybe even most of the time—that it doesn't occur to us that God can meet our needs or the needs of the people around us. How often do we fail in our calling to go out with power and authority to share the good news because we don't have the resources or the abilities or the faith we think are needed? Never forget: the Lord provides. The book of Acts is Luke's continuation of the story as the disciples and then the whole Church go out in faith with the power and authority Jesus provides. But the book of Acts hasn't ended yet. The current chapter of that history of the Church

involves us. It's a story of "learning faith" by "doing faith". If we want to know Jesus better, he calls us to trust him and to walk as his disciples and the flip side of that is that the better we come to know him, the more he will build our faith and enable us to walk more closely as his disciples. Come this morning to his Table. Come in faith to be fed by Jesus, and having encountered him here, let him lead you in faith as you go out into the world equipped for the ministry of his kingdom.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Son to conquer sin and death by giving his life for us. Help us always to remember that if you were willing to give up your Son to provide for our needs, we have good reason to trust that you will provide for every other need. Give us faith to do the work of your kingdom, trusting you to provide and trusting you to accomplish the impossible. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. Amen.