

### *MANDATE FOR A CONGREGATION*

Matthew 10:5-15 (Text: Matthew 10:7-8)

As soon as something in our society is seen to be out of order a Royal Commission is set up to deal with it. One day it is suspected that tax-revenues are being misspent or that medicare claims are being falsified or that organized crime is taking over legitimate businesses. At this point a commission is convened. Political appointees are given authority to investigate the area of concern. They are given a mandate; i.e., they are told how far their authority extends, what they are to investigate, and to whom they are to report.

When Jesus called the twelve disciples he appointed the first Christian congregation. That first congregation was thereafter the standard or norm for all Christian congregations in every era. Needless to say, it's the mandate without which a congregation wouldn't be a congregation at all. We might be a religious group, or a middle-class club, or a social circle; but we wouldn't be a congregation called and commissioned by Jesus Christ himself and appointed to the same task and responsibility as our twelve foreparents in faith. In other words, it's the mandate that makes the congregation.

There's a crucial difference, however, between the mandate the government gives a royal commission and the mandate Jesus Christ gives us. The mandate given the royal commission authorizes its members to ask questions and produce reports. They do that. They make dozens of recommendations. The mandate that Jesus gives a congregation, on the other hand, authorizes us to speak in his name and to do. What's more, what we say and do in obedience to our Lord he then adopts himself, takes it up in his name and uses it to so as to render it *his* speaking and *his* doing.

What's the mandate? First the twelve are to announce, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." This is what they are to declare. Thereafter they are to *do*; specifically they are to do what reflects the fact that the kingdom is at hand. They are to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons.

**I:** -- Every congregation is commissioned to heal the sick. The sick are the unwell; the unwell are those incapable of doing well, those incapable of doing well anywhere in life for any reason. They can be sick in body, sick in mind, sick in spirit. Years ago in my seminary course with Dr. James Wilkes, a Toronto psychiatrist, one student suggested, all-knowingly and self-importantly, that in this age of agnosticism and secularism we could no longer be sure of the church's mission. The student thought he'd said something profound and helpful. Wilkes stared at the student for the longest time as if the student were half-deranged, and then Wilkes snapped, "Are you telling me that you can have a suffering human being in front of you and you don't know what the church's mission is?"

There is a low-grade suffering that is simply part of the human condition; it never goes away. There is also high-grade suffering, intense pain, that can come upon us at any time for any reason and remain with us for any length of time. To be sure, professional expertise is often needed for people unwell in both respects; but even as professional expertise is called for, we should never think our ministry isn't. One afternoon I met at Streetsville "Go" station a 30-year old woman who had been diagnosed (correctly) as bipolar or manic-depressive. As Maureen and I spoke with her over supper in our home, we noticed several symptoms of schizophrenia as well. Plainly she is schizo-affective, to use medical terminology. Maureen and I can't cure her; we can't even medicate her; but this isn't to say we can't do *anything*. We had been asked to meet her, feed her, accommodate her, and take her to the airport (more specifically, to the correct airport terminal) next morning. She lives 500 kms away. If she lived closer to us there would be more -- much more -- we could do, should do, and would do.

Everyone knows that when intense pain comes upon us our suffering becomes a preoccupation: we can think of nothing else. Have you ever tried to do algebra or write an essay with so much as -- so little as -- toothache? If you had wanted for years to hear Itzhak Perlman play his violin and you were told that a ticket was available for tonight's performance, and tonight you happened to have raging headache or unquellable nausea, you wouldn't care less if Mozart himself were playing at

Roy Thomas Hall. Intense suffering is a preoccupation that precludes us from attending to anything else. Then anything we do to reduce someone's Jobian suffering has immense significance.

For years now I have noticed how suffering alters people. A long time ago I learned that underneath the alcoholic's bravado and self-aggrandizement and self-absorption there is a suffering human being who has suffered terribly for a long time. Yes, I'm aware that the alcoholic causes many others to suffer, and his doing so renders others impatient with him and angry at him. Nonetheless, his own suffering is terrible, and more terrible yet for being unrecognized. However obnoxious the habituated person is, we must remember that he is suffering atrociously.

In my work with ex-convicts I have found the same: a man (in Canada we incarcerate nine times as many men as we do women) who has typically come from a family situation of dreadfully poor provision, with the result that someone to whose behaviour our society can't overlook has suffered unspeakably since childhood. After 49 years as a pastor I have concluded that nearly all self-injurious behaviour is rooted in protracted, profound suffering.

What about the suffering of those whose suffering we don't see? We might see it if we looked a little more closely. Not so long ago I used to watch a 70-year old man walk haltingly up and down Queen St. using a cane with four feet on it for stability, one arm folded across his chest and one leg dragging awkwardly. Plainly he'd had a stroke. On other days I'd see the young adult who is intellectually challenged; or the woman whose son is "doing drugs", as she says; or the mentally ill fellow whose wife has left him; or the ex-convict who can't find employment; or the homemaker who would give anything for the smallest part-time job but isn't hired because she can't read. I saw them all on different days. One afternoon I had to locate a congregant in the Cuchulain's, a pub in Streetsville -- and there I saw them all at once. They were all gathered together in one room. The stroke victim with the four-footed cane was trying to communicate in garbled speech with the intellectually challenged fellow, while the woman who can't read was asking the distraught mother to help her with the instructions on her pharmacy prescriptions. They were all together in one room in Cuchulain's. It was as if a summit conference of Streetsville sufferers had been convened and

individuals representing different afflictions were on hand to meet each other.

And then I saw something more: the kingdom. The kingdom of God is the creation healed. Doesn't Jesus mandate the congregation to announce that the kingdom is at hand, in our midst, and then set about healing the sick?

I'm convinced that our Lord's mandate, "Heal the sick," begins with a self-forgetful, non-defensive openness on our part: open heart, open hand, open home. Hospitality is healing.

**II: --** Next in the mandate we are commissioned to raise the dead. The written gospels inform us that Jesus raised several people from the dead, as did others in the early church, according to the book of Acts. Everyone who was raised in this manner, of course, had to die again. Then what was the point of being raised at all? These raisings from the dead were enacted illustrations, as it were, of the unique event in the New Testament: the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Now the resurrection of Jesus Christ is very different from resuscitation, and different in several respects. For one, resuscitation is merely the reanimation of a corpse (someone has to die again), whereas the resurrection of Jesus exalts him beyond having to die; death can never reach out and reclaim him, ever. For another, the resurrection of Jesus includes our Lord's capacity to share the truth and reality of his risen life with his people: we, his people, are made alive before God, and made alive in such away that death will never undo (won't even affect in the slightest) our vivification before God. Paul exults as he reminds the Christians in Ephesus, "You he made alive when you were dead in trespasses and sins." They had been dead before God, dead unto God, spiritually inert, when the risen Christ had seized them and rendered them alive in the Spirit.

Our Lord's ultimate significance is indicated in his triumphant cry, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." He who has been made alive now makes others alive; and those whom he makes alive he now commissions and uses as he continues to make still others alive. In other words, the core of the church's mandate is the commission to raise the dead; we who have been rendered alive

unto God ourselves are now to render others alive as well. How are we to do this? Of ourselves we can't. In the book of Acts the apostles never pretend they have any power to do anything of themselves. Just as surely, however, they know that unless they act, albeit in the name of the risen one; unless *they* act, nothing gets done.

Many people are either puzzled by the word "evangelism" or put off by it. Either they aren't sure what it means, or they think they *are* sure and are repelled by it. Evangelism in fact is a simple matter. Evangelism is simply attesting our Lord himself, in any way we can, with the result that he adopts our witness as he makes others alive unto him. Evangelism, then, is the congregation's fulfilment of the mandate to raise the dead. People who are now spiritually inert are going to be rendered able and eager to respond in faith to our Lord's invitation, "Come unto me". Evangelism is the congregation's raising the dead as the congregation exudes the vitality Christ has lent it and exhales this vitality as surely as God's breath is said to enliven inanimate clay and render that person God's covenant partner ever after.

The congregation has been commissioned to raise the dead.

**III: --** Next in the mandate we are commissioned to cleanse lepers. Since leprosy is a disease, why aren't the lepers simply included among the sick who are to be healed? The lepers are singled out to be *cleansed* just because the intolerable feature of leprosy, in the biblical era, wasn't disease; the intolerable feature was defilement. Lepers were defiled, socially ostracized, outcast. Lepers have to be readmitted to the community as their defilement is dispelled and their repugnance is removed. Lepers are afflicted with a dreadful stigma. Their stigma is truly no disgrace. But society invariably equates affliction with stigma and stigma with disgrace.

During the middle ages there were aristocratic women, high-born, wealthy, who, in the spirit of Jesus Christ and out of love for him, used to kiss the most horribly repellent lepers just to let them know that *someone* loved what everyone else regarded as defiled and found repugnant. *Someone* loved that person and would admit him at least to her and cherish him when others found him only

hideous.

Shortly after I reported to my first pastoral assignment in rural New Brunswick, a villager suggested I visit the "Old People's Home", as it was called, in the neighbouring village of Neguac. (Neguac was only 11 kms. from Tabusintac, but because it was French-speaking it was deemed to be light-years away. Leprosy wears many faces, doesn't it?) I found not an "Old People's Home" but a large residence that housed 23 people who were utterly psychotic. They had been in assorted provincial institutions anywhere from 5 to 20 years. One woman, 25 years old, told me she took "dix-huit pilules par jour" (18 pills per day.) Her family lived in Moncton -- two hours' drive away -- and never visited her. She was a leper.

One afternoon I was about to drive home to Tabusintac after visiting a church member in the Chatham hospital (the manse in Tabusintac was 65 kms. from Chatham) when I noticed a large residential building whose many occupants were severely intellectually challenged. I went in, identified myself as a clergyman, and spoke with the staff. They told me the program had taken over a disused residence of a small Roman Catholic college. The building accommodated two dozen people aged 18 to 45, with I.Qs. of 50 or 60. An I.Q. of 100 is normal; an I.Q. of 20 is needed if someone is to be toilet-trained. An I.Q. of 50 or 60 permits people to do such things as thread beads on a string or cut up pantyhose and hook a rug with the pieces. But of course people with an I.Q. of 50 or 60 will never be gainfully employed. When I spoke with the staff I found many of them cold, even hostile. Finally one woman hissed at me, "We have been in business here for six months, and you are the first clergyperson we have seen." Thereafter I made a point of visiting these people every time I was in Chatham. One day I lamely suggested that perhaps Chatham's ten or twelve clergy hadn't come by inasmuch as they didn't know about it. "Don't know about it?", the same woman fumed at me; "they knew about it before it was developed; they learned what was coming and they fanned out in teams throughout the town urging citizens to resist this facility like the plague; they spread stories to the effect that intellectually challenged people were slobbering neanderthals with perverted propensities; that women and children would no longer be safe. They did everything they

could to smear afflicted people and incite prejudice against them." Weakly I asked the woman what a church group could do for the men and women so afflicted. Immediately she listed a dozen ways in which help could be rendered. Needless to say, any contact on the part of a church group would have been nothing less than lepers cleansed.

Before we can cleanse lepers we have to see them. Whether or not we can see *lepers* is a very good test, I'm convinced, of whether or not we can see *at all*.

**IV: --** Last in the mandate we are commissioned to cast out demons. When disciples are faced with evil, they are to identify it and deal with it. First they have to discern evil; then they have to name it; then they have to resist it. Most certainly they *aren't* to wink at it or trifle with it or compromise with it or exploit it.

One day I found myself speaking with several university students who belonged to a zealous campus group of Christian students whose zeal for the gospel burned white-hot. As I listened to their fervour concerning the spiritual peril of fellow university students who remained unconverted, I noticed how lightheartedly they talked about passing essays around. One person would write the essay; several others would then submit it and receive credit for it. I was appalled at their fraudulence and asked them how they squared their cheating with their burning Christian profession. One fellow replied in all seriousness and solemnity, "We Christians on the campus are so busy doing the Lord's work we have no time to do academic work."

Jesus commands the twelve to cast out demons, not profit from them.

At the same time our Lord cautions the twelve that he is sending them out as sheep among wolves, and so they are to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Because evil is so very evil, uncommon wisdom is needed to deal with it. It's easy to hear our Lord's command to cast out demons and forget that he *also* insists we be wise as serpents. Many a strong person has hurled himself against evil frontally, assuming he could conquer it, only to find himself consumed by it. Many a subtle person has assumed she could disperse evil subtly, only to find months later she had

been subtly seduced by it. Many an unwary person has concentrated so singlemindedly on one evil as to be overtaken by another evil from another quarter. In resisting evil we have to be wise as serpents.

We also have to be innocent as doves. Our opposition to evil mustn't become the excuse for attacking people we don't like. Our opposition to evil mustn't be the disguise that cloaks our vindictiveness or our ill-temper. Our opposition to evil mustn't become the occasion of our boasting that we at least are spiritually superior inasmuch as we recognize evil and name it. We are to be innocent as doves.

Yet even as we are to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, our wisdom and innocence mustn't become an excuse for fear-induced immobility.

Any congregation has a mandate more important than that given any Royal Commission. We are to announce that the kingdom is at hand. And then our preaching of the kingdom must be confirmed as the kingdom is rendered visible in our midst. To this end we are to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons.

I know that my Lord constrains me to fulfil this mandate. Does he constrain you too?

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