

# Receptivity

June 15, 2008  
Edwards (Knox) United Church  
Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 9:35 - 10:8

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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Sometimes when we read our texts we wonder what did this mean? For at times there appears to be a contradiction within the readings. In Matthew we have one such confusion. First, we read that there is a need for those to harvest a bumper crop, and then the disciples are called, and then instructions for the harvest are given. Here is the puzzle - instructions to move on if there is resistance.

We have all been schooled in the idea of mission. It has been phrased in many ways but it comes down to an idea that the world needs Christianity. It leads to sending missionaries to areas of the world where they have not, in the old words, heard the gospel. We were going out to save people from their ignorance.

Within our context we have developed theories of outreach - how the church can make the community better - how families can be helped - how the poor can be fed? In any community there are several options of what this looks like, from the conservative thrust of being born again to the social gospel of dealing with systematic issues: having food banks, street ministries, and other important outreach programs.

One of the current struggles for church identity is what is called missiology. This has to do with what is the role of the church in the transformation of society? What is the unique thing Christians bring to the table so that communities are renewed? Part of the issue is that many of the good works churches began have now become part of what a good society does, from building low cost housing to offering meals on wheels. It is true many of those who lead and volunteer have been informed by their faith, yet it seems to be distant from congregational activity. This has led to the question of what is the mission of a congregation?

So when we read today's texts out of old ideas of saving the world there is a conflict with a more pluralistic and relativistic world - where there are many faiths and no faith. What is our role now?

At one time it was easy to read the first part of Matthew, when there was the idea of the world needs to be saved, and we alone had the solution. There were many hymns and movements that suggested the agenda of preaching the gospel to the pagan and heathens. However, we have seen in our encounter with aboriginals, the destructive outcomes of such a view. So we are struggling with the meaning of preaching the gospel, for we know there is an important reality that is communicated by it, yet we must honor the context of the encounter. How to offer insight without imposing it, is the question?

The harvest is still a reality - meaning is sought, and it does demand many hands. The nature of what needs to be done has changed, though. It is not one of bringing enlightenment to those in darkness. It is one of joining others in addressing the broken hearted - those who struggle for meaning and are without hope - whose world has been shattered. There is, metaphorically, a world that is possessed - a sense of profound unease and anxiety. Fear about the future is just below the surface of our living and we seek words that heal.

It is here that the contraction within the text helps. We are told to go out and heal for the kingdom of heaven is coming. Instructions are given to travel lite - not to carry even an extra shirt. And then if there is no receptivity to move on, shake the dust off your shoes.

When we understand the times, the instructions become clear. And when they do we can translate them into our time.

The instruction begin in the faith that God is at work in the world and we are to join that activity. Not to carry extra shirts is to trust the activity of God - we are not to be worn down with excess baggage, unnecessary support systems. When one begins in the basics and the excess baggage is gone, one knows that what one brings is only part of the event. We don't have all the necessary information and must be receptive to the knowledge of the stranger. It is more a humble approach to mission. It is a sense of depending on the help of the stranger - that there is within those different, a hospitality we can depend on. Such an attitude changes how one moves into a new territory, for it assumes there is already some health in the context. We are not bringing something but finding what is already there for the healing of the community.

Then the phrase of unworthy. At first reading it sounds offensive - to withdraw blessing. Again context is all. The text wants us to focus on the receiver not the giver. This changes the relationship because the power is given over to those who receive. It rejects all attempts of imposing our values on the other, as if they were vacuous, empty until we got there. It rejects all elite's attempts of imposing values. This is not to say what is being offered is not of value, but that the attitude is crucial. If what we offer is valuable the other, out of their context, will value what is important to them, not what we think they ought to value. In other words, there is a truth/value that is beyond us and them we both seek.

When I watched the events of the apology I had this text in mind. The process reminded me of the truth of how we, who apologize, do not control its outcome.

To apologize for a deep wrong does begin with the ones who did the wrong. It begins in understanding our role in the harm done, and what attitudes caused the harm and lamenting those attitudes so we can be let loose of them.

In apologizing we know what is in us that needs to be repented and to be let go of - in this case it was - we know best and you were nothing - uncivilized. In such an attitude, we missed the fact that there was already insight there, healing already there, and we did not join ourselves to that activity.

Once an apology is offered we know it is up to those who received it, to do what is needed. I was struck with the grace of those who received the apology - the event demanded inclusion of aboriginals on the floor of the House of Commons so they could respond immediately. And then the grace. Phil Fountain said the impossible was possible. He said "it takes many hands to turn a heavy page." The response will continue in the Truth and Reconciliation process and as one said, it was a good beginning.

For me, it reinforces the idea of the aim of God who works with persuasion. That God works in many forms and many ways. It reinforced the idea of mission is to join with others by first listening to their insights and values. It is to affirm that God is working with the world as it is to lure it to where it ought to be. I see God at work in this process; it is just what God does. This allows us, when asked why we do good, then one says "I do this because of my faith." "I see God at work." It begins in being asked, suggesting receptivity. Now a conversation can begin. For when one shares only when asked first, it opens doors to deeper conversation.

One aspect of mission is to form identity of those who care for the world. It calls for us to approach the needs of the world, not with we have the answer but what can do together? In the doing the conversation begins.

This leaves an important role for the congregation as the place of identity formation. Through the grapevine the community is known. In a more urban area a church can become known as "the" church when community well being is addressed. In other contexts it can be known by the quality of those it produces - those who pray deeply and care for the community.

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