

The Insanity of Obedience: Mission

When I was called to the life of an itinerant United Methodist Pastor twenty years ago, I didn't say "yes" right away. I wrestled with the call. I was happy where I was. I liked my job at the bank where I worked. I loved the community in Dayton where I owned a home; where my children went to school; and I loved the neighborhood church where almost all of our friends went too.

I didn't have a big conflict with the vocation of pastoral ministry, even though much of it would be new and different for me. I was a little nervous to preach, but I figured I could learn. I loved the bible and teaching, so that seemed appealing. I was a good administrator, so I figured I could handle that. And I liked visiting people and caring for people.

The part of the call that really didn't appeal to me was moving! As I thought about the life of a Methodist minister who moves around a lot, and at the discretion of the bishop, I struggled with moving my family from a place we really liked, and with giving up the control of where we might end up! The hardest part for me was not knowing where we would end up, and leaving behind so many things and people that we loved!

In hindsight, moving hasn't always been easy, but God has always been faithful. I should never have expected anything different! God has been calling his people from one place to another, and staying faithful to them throughout, from the very beginning.

God's plan for his people is that every single one of us is a missionary. We are called to go. Some of us across the street, and others around the world. But Jesus instruction is very clear: "Go, and make disciples!"

When God first formed a people he started with Abram and Sarai. Way back in the book of Genesis, we find Abram and Sarai comfortably living their life in the city of Ur, in the land of the Chaldeans. It's not too far from Babylon. They make their way into Mesopotamia to the city of Haran, and settle there for a while. But God is not done calling them to go from there to Canaan. Let's hear the story from Genesis 12:1 – 5.

¹ The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

*² "I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.*

*³ I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."*

⁴ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. ⁵ He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Can you imagine? Abraham was seventy-five years old when the Lord said, "Go!" That meant leaving behind the friends, the way of life, and the country that Abraham had known his whole life, for a place that hadn't even been revealed to him!

At this stage of life, most people have been settled down for a long, long time. Life is not revving up, it's winding down! And if you do move, it's most likely to downsize to a condo or a

retirement community, not to move halfway around the known world!

God's request must have sounded insane to Abraham.

Can you imagine the conversation with Abraham's friends?

"Hey Abraham, I hear you're moving. Where are you going?"

"Well, I don't really know!"

"And what are you going to do when you get to this unknown place?"

"I'm going to start a new nation!"

"Say what?" How are you going to do that? You don't even have any children!"

This talk must have sounded crazy!

But Abraham packed up, and moved because of four little words: "The Lord said go!"

And take note of the reason God called Abraham to move. He said, "All the people on earth will be blessed through you." You see, God planned to use Abraham and Sarah as part of his worldwide plan. They were going to be a part of God's mission for the world!

In the eleventh chapter of Hebrews we're told, *"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did*

Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person...descendants were born, as many as the stars of heaven..."

So, trusting in God's love for them, Abraham and Sarah leave everything and move. It seems insane. And life doesn't become easy for them overnight, either. Difficulties follow them wherever they go. A few years after arriving in Canaan, a severe famine comes and they have to go down into Egypt. Later, there is a falling out between Abraham and his nephew Lot and they part company each going their separate way. Later, Abraham goes to battle to rescue Lot and his family from kidnappers.

Years go by, and still no child from God from whom this great nation is going to come forth. God reminds Abraham of the covenant and Abraham reminds God that he and Sarah aren't getting any younger! But there is no answer from God about that, just a reiteration of the covenant promise.

More years pass, nearly twenty-five years now since they left Haran. Abraham is 99 years old now, and Sarah is 90. One day three visitors show up at Abraham's tent and tell him, *"I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."*

Sarah overhears the conversation and does what any one of us would do...she laughs! She laughs hysterically, because she knows there is not way humanly possible that this promise is going to happen and come true!

But one year later, God's promise does come true. Sarah gives birth to a son and names him Isaac which means "laughter". God's promises do come to fruition. God keeps the covenants he makes. All of this was a part of God's plan.

Does God still send us out to be a blessing to others? You'd better believe it!

And God certainly calls us to step out in faith despite our fear of letting go of things that are familiar to us. Faith can take us to some potentially uncomfortable places. But that is part of the great adventure of life.

I think that sense of adventure is part of our human nature. We get bored and restless when we're not being challenged. It's the same in our spiritual life. God is prodding us to move beyond where we are. "Come on", he says to us. "You've been sitting in that same pew for the past 25 years! Now, take a step in faith, and go and be a blessing to someone!"

We are called to go—not to sit!

Jesus said to his followers before he left earth in Matthew 28: *"Go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."*

This is called the Great Commission and it is our number one priority as followers of Jesus. In fact, it's the basis for our church mission statement which is, "To glorify God and produce fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ who transform the world."

One of the main responsibilities of being a Christian is to tell others the good news of Jesus Christ, and to reproduce new

believers in Jesus. One of the marks of a mature Christian is a person who shares his or her faith with others.

In Matthew 5, Jesus likens the Christian community to salt and light. Sodium is an extremely active element found naturally only in combined form; it always links itself to another element. Chlorine, on the other hand, is the poisonous gas that gives bleach its offensive odor. When sodium and chlorine are combined, the result is sodium chloride--common table salt--the substance we use to preserve meat and bring out its flavor.

Love and truth can be like sodium and chlorine. Love without truth is flighty, sometimes blind, willing to combine with various doctrines. On the other hand, truth by itself can be offensive, sometimes even poisonous. Spoken without love, it can turn people away from the gospel. When truth and love are combined in an individual or a church, however, then we have what Jesus called "the salt of the earth," and we're able to preserve and bring out the beauty of our faith.

Jesus also said, *"You are the light of the world, let your light so shine before others that they will see your good works."* Works of justice, mercy, peacemaking, and reconciliation are all signs of the Christian community, and of the work of God in the world. When we live out our faith with acts of good works, people will be attracted to the Father. We need to let the world not only hear what we say, but see what we do through our good works, because that is how God works in the world.

The only hope for this world is found in a relationship with Christ. And the only way people will find Christ is for us to go to our neighbors and live the gospel and share the gospel.

Now, I know it's not always easy to do, especially with our family and friends and some of those who are closest to us. We

don't always know what to say. Or, we're afraid we may say something wrong. We may be afraid of sharing something that's so important in our life, only to risk the message being rejected, and if they reject it, it may feel like they have rejected us too.

But the truth is most people want to believe there is a way of life that will give them hope and meaning. Even the most cynical person hopes you can share with them truth that will help them have a more abundant life.

Jesus calls us to be witnesses. We witness to what Jesus has done for us. We aren't the judge. We aren't the jury. We aren't the prosecuting attorney. We are a witness.

Through our witness, we can help people get to the point where they make a commitment to obey Jesus as their Lord. Then we can help disciple them by building relationships, helping them feel supported by a small group, developing a life of prayer and study of scripture, and finally by finding a place to serve and worship.

Patrick joined our church about ten years ago, but gradually fell away and stopped coming. Several bad blows left him reeling and desperate. At his wits end, he decided to try Anderson Hills again. He came, and the sermon that morning hit him right between the eyes. He stayed for the second service to hear it again! He came in to see Mark Rowland that same week, and the two of them had a long conversation.

He picked up the bible and began to read it. He started praying. He received a Stephen Minister to help with his stress. By his own admission, he was not a believer but he was seeking. He got into a men's group, and found support and encouragement. He started Disciple Bible Study. He began looking for ways to serve. Now he shares his new found faith with

whoever will listen. Patrick says, “Anderson Hills---you folks saved my life!”

This is why we do what we do. It’s the reason we “go and make disciples.” We don’t do it for us. We don’t do it for the church. We do it for others. But most of all, we do it for Jesus Christ. Because that is what he told us to do. As crazy as it seems!

But still, it can be awfully hard! We are called, but we don’t really want to be. If you’re like I was, you want like things the way they are. You want to preserve the status quo.

One person who liked things the way they were was Jonah in the Old Testament. But one day the voice of God came to Jonah and said, *“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.”*

Jonah wanted so much not to go that he actually decided to run from God, so he took off in the opposite direction from Nineveh! He found a ship, got on board and headed away from where God wanted him to go.

Now Jonah didn’t like the Ninevites. In fact, nobody did back in those days, except maybe the other Ninevites.

You see, Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. They were the world superpower of their day. They had the biggest, baddest military, and they could overpower anyone else in the world. In fact they had overpowered everyone else, and they had brutally done so. As a result everyone hated them. The Jews hated the Assyrians, and the Assyrians hated the Jews. Imagine hating another group of people so much, and then God calls you to go and reach out to them! Ugh!

So Jonah ran away. But you remember what happens next. A giant storm comes up on the sea, and the ship Jonah is on is threatened with sinking. Jonah knows the storm is from God, so he tells the sailors to throw him overboard and God will calm the sea. So that's just what the sailors did!

But God sent a giant fish to swallow Jonah up, and give him transportation. Jonah cried out to the Lord from the belly of the whale, and he made a vow to do as the Lord asked of him, if only the Lord would deliver him. And the Lord did deliver him...the whale spit Jonah out on dry land! And Jonah keeps his vow made to the Lord; even if he did so reluctantly.

Jonah makes his way to Nineveh. He goes a day's walk into the city and he begins to preach this message, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" This is not exactly the most exciting sermon ever, but it sure got the Ninevites excited! The bible says that they believed God, proclaimed a fast, put on sackcloth and repented of their sins! Revival breaks out in the city from the king to the peasant, and God is so pleased with the response of the Ninevites that he decides not to bring calamity upon them after all!

God had to chase Jonah down. It is not a good thing to run from God, because he always wins. You can't outrun God! God could have said, "Okay, Jonah won't go, so let's send someone else." But he didn't. Jonah was the man.

There may very well be someone out there that God is counting upon you to help, to encourage, and to share the gospel with.

Each one of us has a part to play in sharing the gospel with others, but none of us does it alone. Spreading the good news of the gospel is just like being part of a team. Paul wrote in first

Corinthians 3:6, *“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”* Paul and Apollos worked together in helping the Corinthians church members grow in their faith. We don’t do it by ourselves.

And even more important than the community of other believers with whom we work as a team, is the fact that it is God who works with us, in us, and through us.

In the very first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus tells his disciples, *“You are going to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, but don’t go anywhere until you have received power from the Holy Spirit.”*

Forty days later, the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Day of Pentecost, and Peter who had denied even knowing Jesus not very long before, stood up and boldly preached such a powerful sermon that 3,000 people came to faith in Jesus!

What gave Peter the courage and power to preach such a powerful sermon when not soon before he was afraid to say he even knew Jesus? It was the Holy Spirit! He was filled with Holy Spirit power! He wasn’t witnessing in his own strength, but in the strength of the Holy Spirit. It’s the same with us.

God called Abraham and Sarah so they would be a blessing to others. And we are children of Abraham with the same call to be a blessing to everyone we meet.

Who is God calling you to bless? Maybe you already have some people in mind. Maybe you don’t.

Start by praying. Prayer is powerful! Pray that God will show you three people that you could bless. Pray for their families, their jobs, their finances, their health, or whatever issues they

may be facing. Just think how amazing it would be if each and everyone of us began praying that God would bring to mind three people we could bless! You wouldn't even have to tell them at first! Just start praying for them. Eventually, you'd get excited and want to tell them. Hey I've been praying for you for several weeks now. I wonder if there's anything special you want me to pray for you? Wouldn't that be awesome if someone told you that? You can do that for someone!

Jesus calls us to go. When you joined the church you took a vow to participate in this church by your prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. Part of that vow includes supporting the church financially. Yes, it's about money. We are not ashamed of that. But it's about much more than money. It's about making a difference in this world, and it starts with us hearing the words of Jesus to go to our families, our neighbors, our city, our country, and our world.

So far we have received 71 pledges totaling more than \$260,000. If you are still undecided, it's not a problem. We will take them for the rest of the year. As we sing our last song, would you bring them forwarded so we can pray over them and ask God to bless you so you can be a blessing to others?