

TO LIVE AS ONES WHO ARE SENT

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Text: John 17: 18-21

“Why do we need long-term missionaries anymore?” The question came to me from a man attending the Mission Celebration conference in Louisville last October. “After all,” he said, “our church takes short-term trips. We can go ourselves.”

For this particular Presbyterian, this is all the sending the church needs today. He is not alone. Robert Priest and his colleagues at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School have calculated that a million and a half Christians from the United States participated in short-term mission trips to another country in 2006.

It's as if Jesus had said, “As the Father has sent me, so you should get on a plane, go somewhere for two weeks and build something.” There are even those who will argue that short-term mission trips are the Biblically-mandated way in which Christians in the United States today are called to emulate the travels of Jesus and his disciples. Can't you just imagine Jesus and his band of fishermen and tax collectors, outfitted in matching tee-shirts, descending on a village in Galilee with hammers in hand?

No, this is not what we find in the New Testament. What we do find there are tensions around this question of being sent, usually focused on just who could claim to have been sent. Paul is convinced that all who had seen the risen Christ could claim to be apostles, the ones sent, from *apostello*, the verb meaning to send. Paul bases his own claim to apostleship on his own encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road

The author of the Acts of the Apostles didn't want to see quite so many running around claiming to have been sent. He tends to apply the term “apostle” only to the twelve. Even the one who was sent to tell the other disciples of her encounter with her risen Lord, Mary of Magdala, remembered still in some traditions as the Apostle to the Apostles, disappears from the story.

And the questions continued as Christians organized themselves into churches in different places. Churches wanted to claim participation in that initial sending. So, Peter is remembered as the founding bishop of the church in Rome. And the Mar Thoma Christians to this day claim to trace the beginnings of their faith communities to a visit by the Apostle Thomas to the shores of India.

As these early Christians asked themselves which of the many teachings circulating about Jesus they should affirm as true, church leaders came up with the idea of apostolic succession. Those first apostles had passed on their teachings in a public way

to their chosen successors. Only these chosen successors could claim the authority of having been sent. Thus the church confessed itself to be apostolic, tied to the first apostles, but no longer sent.

The Reformation affirmed that the church is apostolic when it maintains the teachings of the apostles. Again, this had nothing to do with being sent. Our Calvinist forefathers were pretty sure that if God had predestined some groups for salvation, God had already taken care of both getting it done and making it known. God certainly didn't need the help of the church. Indeed, to think God needed such efforts on our part would be presumptuous, if not blasphemous.

Not until the end of the 18th century would an English shoemaker by the name of William Carey articulate the obligation of Christians to carry the Gospel to those who had never heard it in a way that would mobilize Protestants in Great Britain, on the continent of Europe and in North America. Thus the modern missionary movement was born, with some claiming to be sent, with mission societies and later denominational mission boards claiming to be doing the sending.

The very language of sending set up dichotomies. Some were sent; others stayed home. Some were sent; others received those sent.

Yet Jesus' prayer for those who accompanied him in his ministry and those who would come after them allows for no such distinctions. All who would call themselves by Christ's name are sent – to the world – by the One who was himself sent to the world.

The source of this sending is not the gifts we have to give, nor the things we are able to do. The source of this sending is not our denominational structures, however helpful they may be. It is not even the guilt that we feel because we have so much and most others in the world have so little.

The source of the sending is this alone, that God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son.

Being sent is a way of being in the world, living our lives in the world in service to God's love for the world. Being sent may require a change of location, but not necessarily. It does require, however, a certain critical distance, what Jesus spoke of as being in the world but not of the world. One of the gifts to our denomination of moving from the mainstream to the sidelines is that it allows the church to recover its sense of being distinct from the world, so that God can once again send us to the world.

Within God's sending of the church into the world there are particular callings, specific ways of responding to God's sending, for each person, for each congregation, for each presbytery. Our callings within God's sending of the church to the world can come to us in surprising ways: an immigrant family comes to worship, news reaches us of a disaster near or far, an invitation appears from a church leader halfway around the world.

In my own journey in mission I have learned that there is still a need, a desire in the heart of God, for those who will journey from one place to another, immersing themselves in another culture for the long haul, bringing the gifts they offer and allowing themselves to be transformed. Mission workers, said David Bosch, those who go from one church to a church in a different place to serve, are a visible sign of the oneness of the church, the unity for which Jesus prayed.

So be attentive to Christ's call to be sent to the world. Perhaps you may be called to go and spend your life in a cultural context other than the one into which you were born. It may even be, that at some time in your ministry, you may be called to get a plane and go somewhere for a week or two, maybe even to build something.

But remember, as you go, that those among whom you go to serve have also been sent into the world, by the One who has loved us always, who loves us still, and who calls us all toward the new creation.

Amen.

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