

SERMON TITLE: "Gospel of Freedom: Freedom for Service"  
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 9:35-10:15  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: July 30, 2017, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

We United Methodists aren't so aware of this as our Lutheran brothers and sisters, but this year is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of his 95 Theses on the door of the Catholic Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Recently, I read that the famous image of Luther nailing his list of complaints on the church door may be more legend than fact. But, whether Luther actually nailed his concerns to the door or not, his 1517 publication of 95 points of protest definitely set the Protestant Reformation in motion. Luther's goal was to improve the existing Roman Catholic Church, not to start a bunch of new denominations. But, for sure, Luther and other 16<sup>th</sup> century reformers broke the Roman Catholic Church's monopoly in Europe and set Christians free for serving humanity in many different ways.

All through this month of July, as we've been celebrating our freedom as Americans, we've also been contemplating the Christian "Gospel of Freedom" found in Matthew, chapter 9. So far, we've covered freedom from paralysis, freedom for mercy, freedom for life, and freedom from limitations. Today's reading finishes off chapter nine and stretches us a little bit farther into Matthew 10. As we observe the mission of Jesus and his disciples, let's consider how we receive "freedom for service."

### **1—BY FOLLOWING JESUS' EXAMPLE**

In this passage of scripture, the first way we receive freedom for service is by following Jesus' example. Matthew 9:35-36 tells us that "Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them." Whether their need was religious teaching or physical healing, Jesus wanted to do all that he could to help. Jesus understood his calling from God and his role in the world to be one of service to humanity.

There are some people who communicate, “Do as I say, not as I do.” But, for better or worse, most of us learn by observation. Fortunately, Jesus’ good examples were constant, consistent, and considerable. In just the one chapter of Matthew 9, we have seen Jesus heal a paralytic, a bleeding woman, a dead girl, two blind men, and a man who was described as demon-possessed and mute. Jesus also spent compassionate time with people who were labeled as sinners and outcasts. Serving others was what Jesus was all about. Jesus’ example of ministry encourages us to follow in his footsteps, and following Jesus’ example gives us freedom for service.

## **2—BY SEEING THE GREAT NEED**

These verses in Matthew 9 indicate that a second way we receive freedom for service is by seeing the great need. Verses 35 and 36 indicate that Jesus went about all the cities and villages, and that there were crowds of people who needed cures for their sicknesses and diseases. The people who “were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd,” were plentiful in number.

Jesus had eyes to see and a compassionate heart to care, and if we follow his example, we too will see the great need. When a need is so deep and vast, we may want to avert our eyes. Compassion fatigue sweeps over us, just thinking about the extent of the need. But unless we allow ourselves to gaze with our hearts and see what Jesus saw, we won’t be able to follow as his disciples. We won’t have the motivation. We’ll make excuses. We’ll offer blame instead of help.

I tell you often about CORC, the Coalition of Religious Communities. I tell you about this organization because they help us see the great need. Recently, CORC has started putting an educational “fact of the month” at the bottom of their emails. The May fact was that the Utah wage for tipped restaurant workers has never increased since 1991; it has remained at only \$2.31/hour. The June fact was that, in Utah, there are more than 78,000 households that earn less than \$15,000 per year. In July, the fact has been that, in Salt Lake County, in 2015, there were 10,000 less affordable housing units available than there were a decade earlier. Can you imagine how hard it is for the poor to manage when

wages are stagnant for 26 years, yet affordable housing becomes less and less available? Ironically, we gain freedom for service when we see the great need.

### **3—BY HEARING JESUS' POWERFUL CALL**

Matthew's gospel offers us a third way that we gain freedom for service: by hearing Jesus' powerful call. Not only did Jesus call twelve disciples, Jesus told them that the laborers were too few, and that they should pray for more. Ever since then, Christians have believed that Jesus is still calling us to join in his mission of service.

Sometimes a person is asked to do a job, but then their hands are tied. They're asked to reach a goal, but no there's no funding to support the cause. They're given a responsibility, but the boss or the organization doesn't give them enough authority to accomplish the task. Jesus wasn't and isn't that kind of boss. In Matthew 10:1, we see that, when Jesus summoned his twelve disciples, he gave them authority over unclean spirits, and the ability to cure every disease and sickness. That's a lot of power!

It's possible for us to imagine that Jesus handed over authority to those special 12 way back then. It's much harder for us to believe that Jesus is still giving out power like that today. But I believe that Jesus is doing just that. We may not have a cure for every personal and social ill yet, but Jesus is definitely encouraging us to keep working at it. He's calling us with a powerful summons.

If you were here at the church on Wednesday evening to hear the presentation by Larry Dawson on Veterans benefits, you may recall something that Sergeant Chris Hicks said. Chris had to work through some difficult bureaucratic challenges to get the health benefits she needs, but she has succeeded. So, her advice to other veterans is, "Keep pushing for your rights. Don't tell yourself, 'No.' If you're going to be turned down, let someone else tell you that. What you've got to do is stay positive and keep seeking a solution." As Larry Dawson said, there are more benefits possibilities out there than you probably know or think.

Well, our calling from Jesus to serve other people is similar to that. We have to stay positive and believe that where there's a will, there's a way. Jesus will give us the authority and resources to accomplish what he's asking us to do. When we open our ears to hear Jesus' powerful call, then we will receive freedom for service.

#### **4—BY HEEDING JESUS' INSTRUCTIONS**

A fourth and final way that we receive freedom for service is by heeding Jesus' instructions. In Matthew 10:5-15, Jesus told the 12 disciples where to go, to whom they should go, what to say, and what to do when they got there. These instructions were specific enough to include a few examples of where not to go and what not to take. Jesus even gave them a contingency plan of what to do if they weren't well received.

Oftentimes we're limited and held back by fears of not knowing what we're doing. We have concerns and doubts; we lack confidence. But Jesus' disciples didn't have to worry about that so much because he trained them with detailed instructions. It wasn't that these instructions would be the rules for all time. We know, in fact, that later—in the Great Commission— Jesus expanded the mission to include "all nations." But for now, on their very first mission, Jesus freed up his disciples for service by getting them started with clear and simple instructions.

Some of you have heard that I'm going on a mission trip at the end of August. With some others from the Rocky Mountain Conference, I'm going to Mexico to do a Spanish immersion experience. We'll attend classes to learn Spanish better, we'll each stay in the home of a Mexican family to gently force us to use our Spanish, and we'll be exposed to Mexican culture. The hope of the trip is that we can then return home and engage better with Hispanic people in our own communities.

Even though I've been on five previous trips to Latin America, including one language immersion trip like this, it's been 12 years since I last went south. So, my traveling skills are a bit rusty, and I have to say, I really, really appreciate the instructions that I've received in the past couple weeks. Before

setting out on a trip to a foreign country, it helps to get details about what vaccinations are needed, what clothes would be best in that climate and culture, and how to use a cell phone internationally. Having that information frees me from some anxiety so I can go on this trip.

Those of us who are creative types sometimes chafe against rules and instructions. We don't like rigidity and cookie-cutter sameness; we want to express our individuality. But even people who prefer to color outside the lines need to know where the lines are. It's the structure that gives us freedom to function. Likewise, having instructions from Jesus gives us freedom for service.

And here, in Matthew 10, the main instruction that Jesus gives is that his disciples continue the work that Jesus has been doing. They are to "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, [and] cast out demons." In other words, they and we are to meet the real-life needs of the people. We are to lift them out of suffering and misery. This is Christian Discipleship 101. By heeding this instruction, we are given freedom for service.

### **CONCLUSION**

A chorus that we sang earlier this month goes like this:

Freely, freely, you have received.  
Freely, freely give.  
Go in my name, and because you believe,  
Others will know that I live.\*

We Christians have received so much from Jesus. His mercy, his grace, his love, and his healing power in our lives gives us an example, points us to the great need of others, gives us a powerful and authoritative call, and instructs us what to do. The gospel of freedom isn't ours to hoard. We're given the gospel of freedom for service.

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\*Carol Owens, "Freely, Freely," 1972, *UMH* (1989), #389.