

B Epiphany 2 2018

Today's texts are all about God's call. Not just the call of Pastors, but the call to ministry given to each of us in our baptisms. What I am going to talk about today is what that ministry, to which we are called, looks like.

This is my 2nd to the last sermon with you.

It is a bitter sweet time. I am excited for you and for Bill and myself. We are all standing on the threshold of change. It is a good time for us to look a back and give thanks and a good time to look ahead in trust and hope.

I've been looking back over my 33 years of ordained ministry.

Especially those early years.

In seminary we were asked to fill out our interests.

The last thing on my list was to knock on doors.

Most of you know that right out of seminary I was called to start a new congregation, All Saints in Oshkosh, and that meant knocking on doors.

Day after day. Month after month. Door after door

Eventually over the 11 years, I knocked on over 6,000 doors.

I grew to love it. But it wasn't always that way.

At first I might knock on 100 doors and I would find only about 1/3 home and of those, no one was interested in looking at a new church that was going to start meeting in the gym of a little country school. It was disheartening.

However, I was trained by a great man of faith, Fred Marks, who had mentored many pastor developers over the years.

He would remind me that my job was to just plant the seeds. Just get out there and meet as many people as possible, leave as many brochures as possible and establish as many relationships as possible... and trust that God.

And that's when the parable of the sower, the seed planter, became foundational to my ministry. In Luke (8:5ff) it goes like this:

5 "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. 6 Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown."

I love this parable and still, not a week goes by when I don't return to it for perspective and direction.

I've learned that in Jesus day, farmers did not go out and poke tiny little holes in the ground and carefully plant each seed exactly ½ inch beneath the soil. Instead the farmer planted fields by taking big handfuls of seed and throwing the seed on to the ground freely, lavishly, ...

indiscriminately and letting the seed fall where it will.

And yes some would not fall on good soil but some would and it would grow strong and produce.

The farmers trusted God to give the growth.

So, in my early ministry I kept this image in mind and I planted seeds of faith freely, lavishly and indiscriminately, at least to the best of my ability and my hope rested in God's promise to give the growth.

And God did. In all sorts of unexpected ways.

Every day produced at least one faith conversation.

- One day I met a teenager supposedly home with the flu but she told me she knew she was pregnant. We talked and prayed and she promised me to tell her parents that night.
- I met a policeman who had lost a loved one recently and he told me he was blue but was setting up his Christmas Tree anyway. Would I come in and see it?
I did and we talked about the promise of Christmas that God is always near.
- And one morning after a heavy snowstorm, I forced myself to go out and knock on doors. I trudged through a foot of snow to get between the houses. People were all so surprised to see me outside that they invited me in! That day might have been my best day. I walked only one street but three families signed up on the spot. They all became active members at All Saints, Oshkosh. And Kurt Stein who is a former Rock Band director, here at Our Savior's, was a little 5th grader in one of those families! Holy Spirit at work!

The parable of the sower has served me well here at Our Savior's too. When I arrived, you were a church filled with loving, faithful people but you had come through rocky times. Certainly, seeds of faith had been planted but it was like a dry season and growth was delayed.

Honestly, I wasn't exactly sure what to do, but I did know that together we needed to nurture what was already here and to keep on planting seeds of faith and love, freely, lavishly, ... indiscriminately... and again to trust God to give the growth.

Together we did that and yes not everything was a delightful success, but now looking back, we can marvel at what our ministry has produced and give thanks to God for an amazing harvest.

- We have had a number of spiritual growth campaigns and established many small groups and ongoing bible studies who have studied the bible, prayed together and supported one another in profound ways. We continue to have a strong faith formation ministry for people of all ages.
- We have extended our ministry beyond our walls to warming shelters, Father Carr's, Habitat for humanity and have sent at least 1 or 2 mission trips a year to places like N. Carolina, Texas, Red River Valley, New Orleans, and to Slovakia, India and Guatemala.
- And we have had several capital campaigns, including one for our ministry wing
- All of this while, week after week, faithfully praising God in worship. And think about all of the baptisms, funerals, first communions, confirmations, & weddings!
What a harvest God has produced!

There is another passage from the Bible that seems appropriate for today, as we begin to say our goodbyes and as welcome Pastor Dennis Ellison and his wife Kathy. St. Paul, also wrote about planting seeds of faith in a letter to the Corinthians:

⁵(Who) then is Apollos? (Who) is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸The one

who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, ...⁹ For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

So today we could say

Who then is Pastor Jirseld? Who is pastor Hanson? Who are pastors Johnson, Jacobson, Evenson, Swensons?

Who then is Pastor Cath or Pastor Dennis? Servants who plant and servants who water but it is only God who gives the growth. We have a common purpose, we are God's servants working together in God's field.

This is the Good News of God's call.

This is the Good News of the gospel.

Pastor Mode presented Pastor Ellison with a mustard seed foundation stone from Living Faith campaign.