

**MISSION; MATTHEW 9:35-10:8; FATHER'S DAY/JUNE 18, 2017;  
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Today's story from Matthew is about the mission of Jesus' followers. Matthew's entire gospel is devoted to telling us, from beginning to end, what the mission of the church is and showing us what it looks like.

When Jesus calls the disciples he promises to make them fishers of people. Then he demonstrates what it looks like to 'fish for people': healing the sick, caring for the poor, the oppressed.

Today he expresses compassion for God's people who seem lost, like sheep without a shepherd – a heart rendering image; then he says, in another agricultural metaphor – 'the size of the harvest is larger than you can imagine. Pray for God to send workers for this harvest.' He doesn't say go lead the sheep like we might expect; he says ask God to send the right workers; his way of reminding his followers that the mission depends upon God. *Then* he sends them with the same authority and power he had to heal, cast out demons, and preach good news.

Matthew sees fit to tell us not once but many times in different ways what the mission of the church is. Maybe we need reminding. Maybe we get lost in the weeds of lesser tasks, unrelated matters or in our fractious bickering as the early church did.

And not just the church, staying focused on mission is the goal of every organization. Hospitals, schools, non-profits are challenged to define and carry out their mission in a world of rapid change and countervailing forces.

When the Boston Museum was asked to loan a Las Vegas casino one of its Renoir paintings, the board of the museum debated the mission of the organization. When college x gets in an arms race with college y – it's key rival – for dormitory, fitness, and student union amenities, the board and president have to re-examine what the purpose and mission of the college is.

Atul Gawande, award-winning writer, MacArthur Fellow and professor at Harvard Medical School and School of Public Health makes a startling claim about the mission of medical practice and health care.

In his recent book, *Being Mortal*, he raises the question of how we, as a society, and how the medical profession and related services from insurance plans to life care facilities deal with aging and death. "We've been wrong about what our job is in medicine," he writes, "we think our job is to ensure health and survival. But really is it larger than that. It is to enable well-being....If to be human is to be limited, then the role of caring professions and institutions ought to be aiding people in their struggle with those limits. Whatever we offer...is justified only if it serves the larger aims of a person's life. When we forget that, the suffering we inflict can be barbaric."

Gawande tells the story of Dr. Bill Thomas a new gerontologist who returned from Harvard Medical School to his hometown in Cortland, NY. After a short while, Thomas tried an experiment at a local facility.

He asked the staff what they would think about having a dog in the facility. Some thought it would be a bother, others said it might benefit the residents. Then Thomas asked about a cat. One staffer asked, "You want a dog and a cat?" To which Thomas replied, "Two dogs and four cats distributed between both floors."

Then Thomas asked the staff, "One more thing. What about birds?" The business manager said, "No birds allowed in nursing homes." "Yeah," Thomas said, "but picture this place in the middle of winter, in upstate New York, two or three feet of snow on the ground what sounds do you hear?" "Some residents moaning. Maybe some laughter. Televisions on in different areas. Announcements over the PA," came the replies.

Thomas asked again, "What do you hear?" "You're talking birdsong," one aide said. "Yes!" Thomas said. "How many birds are you talking to create this birdsong?" came the obvious question. "Let's start with a hundred," Thomas said enthusiastically.

Dr. Thomas reminded them of the Three Plagues of life in a nursing home – boredom, loneliness and helplessness and that they wanted to find a cure for those afflictions. Wasn't anything worth trying for that?

Long story short, Thomas and his team went to Albany and won waivers for the state regulations against all the things he was proposing. Soon staff started bringing in family members including kids, someone planted a garden out back. They put in a playground for the children. Plus the cats and dogs and birds. It was shock therapy Thomas said.

It didn't go smoothly at first; no one seemed to know what they were doing in the new 'pet-deregulated' environment. There was the usual resistance to change. Some senior staff refused to clean up after the animals when an accident occurred. One senior nurse called Thomas at 3am to ask if he was going to come in to clean up the dog poop she just found on the floor.

But then the residents started pitching in. They re-purposed a medication cart used to distribute mind-numbing drugs but they put to use to feed the animals giving residents milk bones for the dogs and seed for the bird feeders.

That's when they noticed people improving. Some who had been completely withdrawn and non-ambulatory started coming up to the nurses' station saying, 'I'll take the dog for a walk.' The parakeets were adopted by residents and given names. The use of psychotropic drugs decreased dramatically – especially those used for agitation. Deaths fell by 15%.

No scientific reason was given for the drop in deaths but Thomas said the reason was clear, "The difference in death rates can be directly traced to the fundamental human need for a reason to live."

Gawande's point that medicine had lost its way, had forgotten its mission and the story of Dr. Bill Thomas could apply to any organization including the church.

Sometimes organizations get stuck in their own comfort zones; they lose sight of their mission.

We all have seen people and organizations shrink because of the lack of a vision big enough to sustain the organization. I mentioned, last week, Clotilde Deedecker and the Community Foundation when they undertook to assemble into a partnership alienated parties in our public education system in order to create the “Say Yes Buffalo” program which has achieved stunning results.

Now the Community Foundation has set out to reverse the racial bias and bigotry in this community that has held back many from human development and economic opportunity.

Both of these visions and missions were branded by some as ‘fools’ errands’; but the board pushed forward, committed themselves, and put staff and financial resources on the line. Today, Clotilde and the foundation are recognized nationally for their leadership and vision.

The Westminster Economic Development Initiative was our big vision and mission a decade ago. We are the beneficiaries today of embracing that gamble of bundling our Habitat work, small business coaching and loan program and the after school tutoring for West Side children into a 501C3 non-profit organization.

But it’s time for a new vision and mission. We are exploring the possibility of partnerships on the East Side; we’ve been asked by the Jericho Road Ministries to join with them in their brave new medical and church restoration mission in The Democratic Republic of the Congo – a nation torn by civil war and genocide; there are other interesting possibilities on the horizon.

The point is to be a growing, thriving congregation we are in a constant process of asking and embracing not just what our vision and mission are but asking if our vision and mission is big enough to stretch us, to get us out of our comfort zone like those early, first days when we opened the ENERGY after school program and were shaking in our boots because we’d never done it before and didn’t what to expect or if we could handle it.

But what about Jesus’ comment regarding the harvest? He saw people who were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd; his comment was a rebuke of the religious/state industrial complex of his time; they were not fulfilling their mission. God’s people were lost and wandering. There was torment and unrest.

So he simply went about restoring them to health, one by one. Then in today’s reading he gives his followers the same power he has to restore the people to well being. And at the end of the gospel, he commissions all of his present and future followers to go to the ends of the earth with this great mission of to teach, preach and share the gospel of health and well being.

No one person or church can do it by themselves – but collectively, together we can fulfill Jesus’ great commission. The question for every one of us and for every church, therefore, is what is my role/our role? What portion of this great charge can we undertake? What gifts, resources do I have, do we have that can be used? Answering those questions requires us to challenge the status quo like Dr. Gawande; and courage to rock the boat like Dr. Thomas.

We live in the 3<sup>rd</sup> poorest and most segregated city in the nation. We don't have to look far to see people who are troubled and helpless; we live in a nation torn apart by political division as deep as it has ever been, even our leaders seem like sheep without a shepherd; and we live in a world where the need for life's basic necessities is staggering like the Congo. The stakes couldn't be much higher.

What is Westminster's role, calling? It will take courage, imagination, creativity and sacrifice to answer that question.

We are entering a critical time of discernment; on behalf of our governing board, the session, I ask your prayers, ideas, strength, support and energy. Let us pray, as Jesus advised his followers, that God will send workers for the harvest.

It is an exciting time to be at Westminster – a time to think and dream big; a time to take a significant role in bringing equity to our city and harmony to our nation; a time to let the poorest of the poor in broken and underdeveloped nations know that they have friends in America, that they can count on the church of Jesus Christ.

We're giving bibles to our young people today. Maybe a good place for us to start discerning where and how we are being called to serve is by reading the very book we claim such significance for and recommend to our children.

My mentor always said the bible is a dangerous book. You can't read it and stay the same. It has a way of expanding who you are and challenging you to give yourself away. Identifying and embracing our next big mission as a church will take nothing less. Amen.