

Make Yourself Available for God
The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
The Fifth Sunday of Pentecost, Proper 6, Year A, RCL
June 15, 2008

My first job out of college was with a mid-size public accounting firm in Monmouth County. We had numerous local clients, as well as some out of the area—North Jersey, and even New York City. Somehow, by the luck of the draw, I guess, I got assigned some New York City clients. This would have been no big deal—but I was not very familiar with New York. You see, my father did not like the city, and except for a bus trip or two to see a play, and an 8th grade CCD trip to the Cloisters, I had not spent any time there. To say I was nervous was an understatement; I felt woefully unprepared and nowhere near up to the task.

The first time I went to the client was with a more experienced associate; the partner drove all of us, through the Holland tunnel, and then pulled over to let us out on a corner to catch a cab uptown to the 51st and 9th where the client was located. I tried to pay attention, as overwhelming as it was. After we were done, we caught a cab back downtown to Orchard and Grand, met up with everyone else, and went home.

The next trip up to New York was, for better or worse, my solo flight. Struggling with a large case full of client files and my trusty adding machine, I was dropped off on the same busy corner and stood there trying to flag down a cab to take me uptown. That was an adventure in itself, though I had better luck than I hoped. Returning downtown, my client took pity on me, and summoned me a cab, which took me down to the corner of Orchard and Grand as I asked. Now all I had to do was remember where we were to meet....and eventually I found that too. I was so very relieved when that day was over.

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Those first twelve sent out by Jesus may have felt the same way I had at first—scared, unprepared, inadequate. But while all I was asked to do was travel about and do accounting work, they were given a much larger charge: cast out unclean spirits, cure sickness, cleanse lepers, raise the dead. Talk about overwhelming! They had been following Jesus around, paying attention to his teachings, watching as he healed the sick, stilled a storm on the water, raised to life a synagogue leader’s daughter. They were probably still taking all of this in when Jesus called them together, informing them that he was commissioning them to go be laborers in the mission field. And as thorough as Jesus’ instructions may have been, I am sure that there were still some nervousness and fear lingering deep inside.

Jesus’ instructions were basic, and remind me of what one person said to me early on in my ordination process: “God does not call the equipped, but equips the called.” In other words, God does the choosing—and for those who say yes, God provides for the journey. All this is evident in Jesus’ words as he tells the twelve not to carry extra clothing or money or equipment—for they are the equipment; their willing souls and bodies are all God needs to carry on God’s work. God will provide the rest. Jesus also warns them that this will not be easy, and not to expect huge success; after all, this is not some sold-out concert tour. However, he asks them to persevere, to be faithful, to trust. This is hardly a good pep talk; certainly it is not a positive toned sales pitch. Let’s be honest, who wants this job? Sure, you get to go around, and God willing, make a difference in people’s lives, but for what—a few meals a day and a modest roof over your head—if you’re lucky? You’ll have to deal with rejection, perhaps even persecution, and you’ll be working without any printed or flashy materials to help sell the gospel message.

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No brochures, no colorful power point demonstrations. Just you and God and the Gospel—out there, among the people of your community.

And that perhaps was the toughest part—for they were to go to those in their community. Sure, it could have been dangerous if they were sent into Gentile or Samaritan territory—but in a way it could have been easier. Think about it—if you go somewhere where they don't know you and fail, who knows? And if they reject the message, you could write it off to any number of things—you're an outsider, don't speak the language well, they are just plain weird anyway. But if you are sent out in your own area, there are no excuses. You know the people, the lay of the land, the customs, the language. They may embrace the good news of God's kingdom willingly, and embrace you as the bearer of that news—or they may look at you askance and wonder just who you think you are. The hostility and rejection and even persecution the apostles suffered may have felt even harsher because it came from those closest to them.

We, too, are sent out. Empowered by the Holy Spirit at baptism, we are commissioned to share the good news of God in Jesus Christ—in words, and in deeds. Just like it was for the twelve, this is no easy task. Though we may believe deeply and care greatly, we hesitate at sharing our faith with others. We may feel inadequate, ill-prepared, scared of rejection. We worry about what people will think of us, or how it will affect our career or relationships; we may even be concerned that if we act as Jesus calls to act—loving our enemies, being forgiving, living generously—that the world will run rough-shod over us and leave us trampled in the dust. But Jesus does not ask us to abandon our street smarts, but rather to use them to communicate with.

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He asks us to step out in faith, and not fear; and to keep at it. There will be plenty of persons along the way who are not in the right place in their lives to hear the message of the gospel, but that does not give us permission to stop trying. In this sometimes hard and too often violent world, the message that God loves and forgives beyond all measure can be a tough one to swallow. After all, where's the proof?

The proof of the gospel message lies in the cross, but it is also to rest in you—in your life, your words, your actions. It has been said the 'your life may be the only gospel anyone ever reads.' What does yours say about you? I know mine needs more cleaning up than I'd like to admit—but I am committed to keep trying. Even when I feel woefully inadequate—in fact, especially when I feel woefully inadequate—I know God is there, and that whatever I seem to offer really comes from my Lord. All I need do is make myself available.

Will you?

Amen.