

“Marching Orders”

Matthew 9:35-10:1, 5-6, 14-20, 22

Those of you who have ‘tolerated’ my sometimes random musings... both in worship and outside of it... know that I have a particular penchant for ‘old expressions.’ (Being one myself... ☺) One that came to mind this past week was **“Red letter day.”** Show of hands who are familiar with it? Unlike so many sayings that have either recent history... or no history at all... this one has DEEP roots in antiquity. The term “red letter day” dates back to ca. 500 B.C. Roman calendars would indicate important days on their calendar by printing them in... RED LETTERS. (duh) Though not substantiated, it has been widely claimed that at a pivotal meeting of religious leaders in 325 A.D., known as the Council of Nicea, the practice was established of printing important **holy days** on the church calendar in RED. (It was, as many of you know, out of this ‘council meeting’ in the early 4th C. that we came to have the confession of faith we know as “The Nicene Creed.” So, you see, some good actually CAN come out of ‘committee meetings!’) Regardless of its origin, however, in general the term “Red Letter Day” refers to **any day of special significance or singular opportunity**... important days like, for instance, ‘Father’s Day,’ ... or ‘Mothers Day’ ... or ‘Birth-days’...etc.

It is this notion of ‘red letters’ indicating ‘special significance’ that led to the printing of a particular version of the Holy Bible: that’s right... the “Red Letter Version.” Those words written in ‘red letters’ were believed to be the actual words of the Lord Jesus Christ. Words that, because of the one who spoke them, were most certainly considered to be of ‘special significance’... filled with ‘singular opportunities’... to say the least, VERY important.

Today we will be considering some of those words that hold ‘special significance’ for us who have been called to follow after Jesus. Words spoken by Him to those first disciples... but that are just as meaningful to us, his current day disciples. As we, members of the ‘**army of God,**’ continue to strive to better understand just what our **Lord and Leader Jesus** is **directing** us to do, these words could well be considered our **“Marching Orders.”**

As we consider several of the specific commands of Jesus, let us look at them through the lens of the eyes of Christ. How his actions are to be our own. And overall, just why Jesus did what he did, and how his motivations should also be our own. The opening verses say that Jesus traveled around the countryside, teaching, preaching, and healing. WHY? Because, ***“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”*** (Mt. 9:36) He saw the daily struggles in the eyes of the people, overwhelmed with the burdens of their daily living, not knowing where to turn, aimless, without direction... and for those wayward sheep, Jesus had COMPASSION. Does the condition of Jesus’ contemporaries sound familiar? Can you not look in the eyes of people you come in contact with whose eyes are weary, overwhelmed, not sure where to go... ***“harassed and helpless”***? Like Jesus, we are to demonstrate **compassion** for those who need ‘the Shepherd.’ And in the words of a song, *“we ALL like sheep have gone astray...”*

So, we know **WHY** we are to follow Jesus’ example of going through the surrounding ‘cities and villages’... you know, like downtown LC at the corner of Ryan and Pujo... teaching, preaching, healing, singing, laughing, crying with the people -- because of His **COMPASSION**. Our ministry in Christ’s name is done not to add ‘feathers in our cap,’ or ‘jewels in our crown,’ but to show the LOVE of God made flesh in Christ Jesus. So, now that we know WHY... just HOW are we to do that? Well, first, in order to accomplish this ‘**Great Commission,**’ we need to PRAY for PEOPLE... that God supply the **WORKERS** necessary to reach those ‘sheep without a shepherd.’

In verse 37 of that 9th chapter, Jesus says to his disciples... to US... ***“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few;³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”*** (Mt. 9:37-38) Now, does that sound familiar? I’ve shared with you before that at precisely 10:02 every morning my phone goes off to remind me of another ‘10:02’... in the Gospel of Luke: ***“He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”*** (Luke 10:2) Similar words to these two references can also be found in John’s Gospel... so, ‘third time being a charm,’ they MUST be important! If this particular small ‘platoon’ of God’s Army is to successfully carry out our mission, we must do a better job of **recruiting**. Too many of our

'soldiers' are 'graduating,' and the ranks are becoming thinner. So we must PRAY to our 'Cosmic Commander-in-Chief' to send us more laborers. But this is not simply a prayer that those new 'recruits' will simply come in through that door *on their own*. They need to be individually invited, encouraged... particularly PRAYED in here by YOU! Pray that God put on your **heart** people to share God's love with... with a **mind** convinced of the importance to use your **lips** to speak to them about your faith... and how it is expressed through this body of believers.

And lest you think this is about going up to complete strangers and asking them what church they attend... even tho I know that there are some saints like Nancy Hanchey who have absolutely no problem in doing so... look at what Jesus has to say about the 'target audience'... about just '**WHO**' we are to 'recruit': 'DON'T go to the Gentiles, or the Samaritans,' "***but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.***" (Mt. 10:6)

Before you go out to evangelize your neighbor, or co-worker, or bank teller or grocery clerk or restaurant waiter, think about those who are in your own 'house.' Your family. Sons, daughters, grandchildren, siblings, cousins. And yes, I know just how hard it is to talk 'religion' (like politics) with your family... but if you truly LOVE that family, shouldn't you want to make sure you will spend the rest of **eternity** with them?

And that 'house' is not only of your *natural* birth family. It also relates to your *spiritual* birth family as well. Do you think that we have 'lost sheep' in this little 'house' of ours here at FPC? Take a look at that directory. See any names that you haven't seen the face to go WITH that name lately? Faces that should be right next to you in the pew this morning.

In discussions of the numbers of the church... membership and worship attendance... it has always been pretty accepted practice that if 50% of your rolls were actually in church on a given Sunday, you were doing pretty well. Well, I happen to think that is BOGUS (insert other word that I cannot ! If we are truly to be the type of 'Great Commission' church Christ calls us to be, there ought to be MORE people in church that are officially members. You want to 'PRAY to the Lord of the harvest?' Try praying THAT prayer...

Sooo... each and every day, as you **PRAY** for **WORKERS** to labor in the harvest... being mindful of **WHO** you are to reach (not merely those marginal acquaintances, but those who are

closest to you in both church and blood relationships)... being spurred on by **COMPASSION** for those who are 'harassed and helpless' (YOU and ME!)... WHAT else does Jesus WARN us about?

Well, for one, Jesus implores us to exercise **WISDOM**. He tells his disciples ***"I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."*** (Mt. 10:16) We must be well aware that there are many 'wolves' out there eager to devour us 'sheep.' And I am not simply talking about those cynical, secular people who may be hostile to the cause of Christ. Yes, we know many who think it's a waste of their time to go to church... OR, perhaps even worse, those whose 'body' may be in church, but their 'heart' is not...

But let us also be aware of those 'wolves' of a non-human nature that still seek to attack us followers of the Great Shepherd. Distractions. Complacency. Doubt. Temptation. The very 'cynicism' and 'secularism' that we so decry in those 'less faithful' than ourselves. As we seek to bring the Light of Christ to a world so influenced by the prince of darkness, let us strive to be an example of the wisdom of the Father, and the innocence of His Son, the Lamb who was slain for all.

And finally, as we consider this 'laundry list' (you know, as in 'washed as white as snow') of 'Marching Orders' in our mission for Christ, let us most of all not WORRY about how well equipped we are to carry out that mission. In Jesus' words, ***"Do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; ²⁰ for it is NOT you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."*** (Mt. 10:19-20)

In SO many situations, the biggest barrier we have to adequately expressing ourselves is our own personal FEAR. Just this week I shared with someone how even with all of the 'cemetery'... er, 'seminary' training and pastoral experience that I have, there are times when I myself struggle with doubt that I am going to say 'the right thing.' ... Sometimes even when I step up into this pulpit. We ALL have faced such times of self-doubt, of unworthiness, to speak up in certain situations. But what I must remind myself is something I heard from a valued colleague many years ago: ***"God doesn't call the equipped; He equips the called."***

We are called to trust in Jesus' promise to His followers: ***"... what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."*** (Matthew 10:19-20)

As each one of us seeks to be better 'equipped' for the 'calling' God places on my life, let us seek that most tangible, inspired source of living and loving that we have: God's Holy Word. And may we particularly be sensitive to the instruction we receive through those 'red letters.' In closing, I would leave you with some words from a contemporary Christian song by the group "NewSong". It is entitled... as you might imagine... *"Red Letter Day"*:

"I had a friend call me up and tell me How he **struggles** through **each day**
I told him that **I didn't have all of the answers**; This world's a crazy place
I've learned to hide God's word in my heart
So **I can have it with me** when the **pressures of the day start**

I do believe it's gonna be another red letter day ...
another chance for me To **take His Word** and **walk by faith**
I got a **smile** with **every step I take... Knowing He is here with me**
It's gonna be a red letter day!

As you and I engage friends every day in this crazy world we live in, know that it's OK to admit that you don't all the answers. But as you continue to 'hide God's Word in your heart'.... Walking by faith, knowing that your God is with you... May you have a smile with every step you take. For as you seek to live with the **same type of compassion** that **Jesus had** for all those 'harrassed and helpless' people... you can KNOW *'it's gonna be a red-letter day.'*