

COMMUNITY IN MISSION

*Rev Jim Allan
Camrose United Church
12 June 2005*

Exodus 9:2-8a - A priestly kingdom and a holy nation
Matthew 9:35-10:8a - The mission of the twelve apostles

No one should ever have to get up and go to work right after hearing such a beautiful rendition of one of that person's all-time favourite hymns. So I'm just going to sit here for another ten minutes! I have to apologize for that blank look on my face during the children's time when Mary Ann looked at me and said "That's what you're talking about later, right?" She said she tries to guess what I'm going to talk about, but that's not true. She asks me what I'm going to talk about, and I try to guess. Early in the week it really looked like today's sermon was heading in the direction of discipleship--it really did--but that's not really where it has ended up. So during the children's time my mind started racing, wondering how I could tie that in with my sermon. But I'm not even going to try.

I'm going to talk about community in mission--what it is to be community, and what it is to be in mission in our lives. (I have another apology to make. I'm going to have to check afterwards to find out what today's reading was supposed to be, because the Old Testament reading listed in the Bulletin was wrong. I'm sorry, Penny [Nelson, the lector]. I must have written down the wrong one. The correct one was in the book of Exodus, but was probably supposed to be chapter 19 instead of 9.) The passage Penny read was about the time moving toward the Exodus when Moses was negotiating with Pharaoh about how the people were going to get out of Egypt. But the passage I wanted comes later on while they are in the wilderness, having left Egypt but not yet having entered the Promised Land. What the people had left behind in Egypt was only a memory--a horrible memory--but what was going on in the wilderness made that memory look like something to which they might have wanted to return. However, they were living in the promise of what was to come. There is beautiful language when Moses, talking to the people after he had been on Mount Sinai, told them God was saying to them: "I have brought you out of Egypt like on eagles' wings [that beautiful imagery of eagles' wings] and I've made you a holy nation." And so it's that sense of the way this community of the people of Israel was being forged, was coming into being in the wilderness during the time between Egypt and the fulfillment of the promise.

We are very much like that as a faith community, not just our congregation but the church as a whole. We have left something behind. Everyone here this morning can remember a time when the church had a kind of stable constancy that we now seem to have left behind--our way of worship, our way of thinking about our faith. Most of us willingly leave that behind because we realize it is a faith and a theology and a style of religion that worked for an era gone by, but is working less and less for the world in

which we live today. So we have a positive feeling and choice mixed with a reluctance and regret about what we have left behind as a church.

As an individual congregation we are looking at what it means to be growing as a congregation, and the financial crisis that was referred to earlier this morning is in part the challenge of being about a 250-person congregation trying to pay for a 350-person program. People are realizing we need the growth that should be happening, and that we have anticipated, in order to have the financial foundation really to be the church that we want to be. So the church is in this in-between place in the wilderness. Not just this congregation; the church as a whole finds itself having left an old paradigm behind. There are many options for the new paradigms of what it is to be church, to be religious organization, but we're still in that in-between wilderness place as were the Israelites, waiting to see what is going to come for us.

That's a pattern for all of life, too. It doesn't apply just to ancient Israel or to the church as a community of faith; it applies also to us individually in our lives. We all encounter times in our lives when a few years earlier everything seemed stable and together such that we understood what we were about. And now it seems as if it doesn't work any more, and all of a sudden we've got new challenges, things are changing, and we're in a kind of wilderness and we feel like we're wandering. This is a part of life.

However, it was during that wilderness time when God forged this community through the leadership of Moses, and the people became the people of Israel. They became a people with a sense of identity, and that identity was rooted in their relationship with this God who brought them out of Egypt, who chose them to be a holy nation, who cared for them and led them, and who now accompanied them and was present with them. So out of that sense of the sacred presence and our relationship to a God who is not just present, there is a whole story of the way God has been with us and has led us throughout the years. We lived through that wilderness time, and one of the most important things is to maintain our sense of bond, our sense of community, because in a way the one thing that could defeat us is for us to break apart and to be alone on that journey. When we are individually in those wilderness times of life the most important thing we need is to have others with us and to know that God is with us--to know that we are not alone. It's the most important saving act in our lives. So community is forged in that wilderness.

The passage from Matthew is that place where Jesus has been with the disciples for quite a time, and there has been a growth on the part of the disciples, and they have learned to recognize how God is moving, how the Spirit is acting through this little band of followers, this small community of the beginnings of the church, and in their own lives. Then, paraphrasing Jesus:

Now it is time for you to go out and start sharing what you have learned. Go and talk to people. You don't have to go to all the gentiles and everybody else. Go just to our own people, the Jewish people. Just go and talk to them from one town to the next, telling them the truth that you have come to know here. Just tell them. You don't have to persuade them, you don't have to market this, you don't have to do any of that. You just have to tell them. Some will get it and some won't, and that's all there is to it. If they don't get it, just shake the dust off your sandals and walk on, because there is

somebody else who will get it. And that will be enough, because you're not responsible for the power of this gospel; the gospel has a power of its own. All you have to do is tell the story, and the story will do the rest because it has its own power.

Our challenge today as a church is to be in the midst of a world where we find ourselves sitting here thinking this is the word of life; this is so powerful for us. And yet we feel that need to have more people here to fill up the pews or to fill up the coffers or to make this thing succeed. But that's not really the truth. We get lost in thinking that we need more people so we have more money. We get lost in that, but that's not the truth. The truth is we have something to offer the people in the community around us, and if we were offering that, those who would respond would be here. The increase in growth and all of that sort of flourishing would just be a side effect. What is at the essence is the mission, the mission that Jesus gave to his disciples and the mission that is ours as a church. And part of our wilderness time is rethinking and reaffirming and rearticulating that mission for ourselves.

The challenge is to learn, to learn again, to learn anew, how to tell this story that has been entrusted to us--how to tell it, how to show it, how to live it, how to demonstrate it, how to communicate it, how to give it as a gift to the community. We're not going to the community needy, needing something from them. We're going to the community with something to offer that is crucial to their lives. Some will get it and some won't, and that's all there is to it. That's all there ever has been to it. Some will get it and some won't. But the beauty of following the Spirit is that the ones who get it will be enough, enough for the church to fulfill its mission, for this church to be what the Spirit is calling it to be.

It's the same thing in our personal lives. One of the highest goals in our lives is to discover our mission, our purpose--to discover something beyond ourselves. You see, the church's mission is not about survival. Survival is a side effect that we enjoy, but that's not our purpose, it's not our mission. Our mission is to offer something beyond ourselves to the world around us, to be channels of that grace that has come to us from God. In our personal lives, that's what makes the difference between an empty or meaningless life, and a fulfilled life. The fulfilled life is the discovery of a mission, a purpose, in our own lives that is the opportunity to give something to someone else--something beyond ourselves. When we think about what the church has to offer, it's a rich and exciting process to discuss and explore what it has to offer, and to listen how people are finding new ways to say the gospel in our world today.

As most of you know, the United Church of Canada is currently in the process of writing a new Statement of Faith. We had a group studying it a few months ago. And the noon-hour Bible study has been studying the draft as well, finding it very exciting just to listen to the freshness of those words and what they say to us as we find ways to say our faith.

By way of conclusion I want to share with you a little bit of that draft. It's the section on Spirit and Wisdom entitled "Enlivening and Transforming Spirit." This is the United Church of Canada trying to put its faith into words, and how we share it with the world around us:

From the beginning the Spirit has swept over the face of creation, animating all energy and matter and moving within the human heart. In our deep longing, the Holy Mystery speaks our prayers of awe and gratitude, vocation and compassion. The Spirit continually enlivens and transforms us and the world. Through beauty, truth, and goodness we encounter the Mystery of Spirit.

Encountering the Mystery of Spirit is, in my perception, one of the deepest longings of people in our world today. And all we need to do as a church is learn how to say that, learn how to talk about that life-transforming and world-transforming encounter with the Spirit, learn how to talk about that with the people in our world around us. Some people will get it, and they will gather and become part of the faith community. That's our mission, that's our purpose as a community forged by God and sent into the world with a truly life-transforming mission.

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor