

Sermon 1703

Matthew 9.35-10.8

June 28, 2020

“No one is irreplaceable.” That’s what Shawn Nielsen, our former school director told me as she was trying unsuccessfully to retire the first time, some three years ago. “No one is irreplaceable.” It bothered me. No, it didn’t bother me that there are changes in the pastorate, like we are experiencing again with Pastor Kolander leaving to shepherd the congregation at The Springs. I understand that. I left two calls before I came to our valley. The places I left got along without me. I know “No one is irreplaceable.” But it is a half-truth—it doesn’t tell the whole story. “No one is expendable.” You put those two statements together and you get the full picture in the Lord’s Kingdom. “No one is irreplaceable, but no one is expendable.” See if you agree as we look at Jesus sending forth his apostles for the very first time.

Shepherds for the Sheep

1. No one is expendable (9.36-37, 10.5-8).
2. No one is irreplaceable (35, 38-10.4).

“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (9.36-37).”

No one is expendable. That’s what Matthew is trying to tell us with these opening words. Jesus goes through “all.” All means all. Not a one of those places was expendable, able to be overlooked. Jesus goes through “all the towns and villages.” The word “city” is absent from Matthew’s listing. Jesus focuses on the places others overlook, the Sandy Valley, Searchlight and Blue Diamond kinds of places. According to Jesus, they are not to be missed.

He preaches the “good news of the kingdom,” but he also heals diseases and sicknesses, “every disease and sickness,” to be exact. Again, no one is left behind. No one is expendable. Jesus cares for them all. He serves them all, because he had compassion on them all.

At the end of the school year at Green Valley Lutheran School, we’ve got quite a lost and found when it comes to clothes. The preschoolers are hard on jackets and shirts and pants. Shoes get a beating. They sit in the box, threadbare and abandoned, almost forlorn, if clothes can have feelings. That’s how Matthew pictures the people, like sheep who have been skinned and discarded, sheared and thrown on a pile. I don’t want to feel like a dirty shirt thrown on the floor and forgotten. You don’t want to feel like a sheep just sheared, dazed and confused, a little unsteady on your feet. No one is expendable.

The world certainly doesn’t look at it that way. There is more than a sneaking suspicion when people talk about only 125,000 dead that people are expendable. I have talked about this elsewhere, so I will only mention it in passing. All the health precautions we are being asked to take will help others, not help ourselves. In this

way we are exactly like sheep. Sheep don't have sharp teeth to defend themselves. They aren't fast. No claws. They even taste good. Their only defense is the herd. Their only hope is that they will be the last ones the wolf eats and by then he will have lost his appetite. Infect me last. Let me hold out until there's a vaccine. There's a sneaky suspicion that some business models view the individual as expendable. Layoffs come easy. Entire industries dry up due to automation or moving the business overseas. Personal safety takes a back seat to corporate profits.

Now imagine if those earthly uncertainties, anxieties and dreads extended to our spiritual life. Imagine that we didn't know how to get to heaven. Imagine if we thought we had to earn God's forgiveness. Flayed alive and left to die on the side of the road? No, we'd be more like those bleached bones Georgia O'Keeffe painted, half buried in the desert sand.

The disciples exhibited the same, "no one is expendable" attitude Jesus did. They followed Jesus' directions. "Go to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give (6-8)."

There was nothing they walked away from, not sickness, not death, not even demon possession. No one was too far gone for them. No one was expendable. The kingdom of heaven was near to all.

I hope that over the past four years Pastor Kolander has been here and the past, what, summer of '88, now the summer of 2020, I am so bad at math, 22 years I have been here, no one has gotten the feeling that they were expendable. There were months where it seemed all I and Pastor Kolander and before that, Pastor Pfeiffer, did, was to check up on people who hadn't been in church for a long time. I remember one Saturday Pastor Pfeiffer visited the same family I visited later in the day. We had to work on our coordination a bit more. The father was impressed, though it didn't change his habit of not coming to church. Another person joined in the early years after we had been mailing him the yellow "Pieper Papers" for three years, three times a month. "You were the only church that seemed to want me." Another member who is now in heaven, Eddie, joined our church when they moved into the neighborhood from California. Kay was a lifelong Lutheran, but Eddie was Roman Catholic. "You go to St. Thomas Moore?" No, for the past 22 years he had gone with his wife to her Lutheran Church. "Don't you think it's time you became a Lutheran?" I asked him. "Well, nobody's ever asked," he said. "I'm asking now," I said. We've got a dent in one of our communion trays from him horsing around while he was serving as a communion assistant. That's when I tapped our high school gentlemen—they pay better attention.

I hope whatever pastoral staff that has graced these four walls and whatever teaching staff that has adorned our preschool, Kindergarten and First Grade rooms, I hope all our of public ministers have consistently given the impression that no one

is expendable. Everyone is important. If there have been times people went away thinking they didn't matter, we are sorry. We are only human and are limited by human frailties, this rotten reality that we can only be at one place at one time, and the multiple demands that squeeze twenty five hours out of a day, eight days a week.

But Jesus has none of those limitations. Where we fall short, he shines forth. He has seen every one of your tears. He has heard every sigh. He has upheld and supported each of us in ways too wonderful for us to imagine. It is only because of him that all of us have eluded the devil's plans to kill as many Christians as he can through the COVID-19 virus. You are the apple of his eye. Jesus loves each one of us the best.

Shepherds for the Sheep. No one is expendable. No one is irreplaceable.

Matthew's account of Jesus appointing the apostles starts out with Jesus carrying the load. He went through all the towns and villages. He was preaching. He was healing every kind of disease and sickness. It was pretty much a one-man show. In a very real way, the apostles were going to replace Jesus. They were going to go places where Jesus couldn't go. Although Jesus was truly God, he had put away the full use of his powers as God when he came into this world. So Jesus was limited by the same considerations I grumbled about a little while ago. He could only be in one place at one time. He got tired. He couldn't meet a mountain of conflicting demands upon his time. Sometimes he had to put things on hold and get away. Sometimes when danger threatened he had to pull out of an area entirely and move to a safer area to work.

“Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field (38).”

Jesus is asking his disciples to do nothing less than pray to God the Father that Jesus get help, that the message of Jesus be amplified by more people preaching and healing in God's name. No one is irreplaceable.

The answer to their prayer comes quickly. “He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness (10.1).”

Then we have that magnificent list of names. These men will change the course of history. They will turn the world upside down. Since we are in on it, we know what they are going to do and we thrill at how they got started on this journey. We “knew them when.” Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew, that sharp ex-tax collector. James son of Alphaeus, Thaddeus, Simon the Zealot. And then, because Matthew, too, knows how the story will end, the dark foreboding mention of Judas Iscariot, the one who will betray Jesus. Already from the start Jesus knew what Judas would do, but Judas deserved the chance, was owed the opportunity, to follow his free will in making

his decisions to keep following Jesus or, as he chose to betray Jesus, become a pawn and victim of the devil's plans.

Now, when I say no one is irreplaceable, I hope you realize I am not talking about the glorified Jesus. No one can replace God Almighty. Seated at the right hand of God, Jesus rules all things by his power for the sake of you and me, the Church, all believers everywhere. No one else can take up that job, nor does anyone have to. Jesus lives and rules eternally. All his decrees are perfect.

And, while Jesus lived on earth, there were areas where, according to his human nature, he was irreplaceable. No one could lead the perfect life. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," the Bible says. But it also says of Jesus, "He was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin." That's why Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus is our righteousness before God. The holiness of Jesus is credited to our account. And in this other area Jesus is irreplaceable. He died on the cross for us. "No one can die for another, the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough," the Bible says. Yet John the Baptist correctly introduced Jesus that first day near the Jordan River, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

But apart from those two areas, Jesus was replaceable. He gave his disciples a job to do—preach the Good News to all creation, baptizing in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And then he ascended into heaven. The world would not see Jesus again, not until every story had ended on the Last Day when Jesus will return. He left this world. He no longer would be the one teaching. He would not be the story teller, weaving his wonderful parables out of daily events. He would leave the Twelve to carry on the work. And they, in turn, would enlist more and more people to carry on that work. And that unbroken chain of witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has come down to you and to me. We are the ones now facing that greatest of all tasks. We carried it out when we saw to it that our children were baptized, when we brought them to church and Sunday School and made sure they were confirmed. We carried out that greatest task when we invited friends or neighbors to come with us to church. We carried out that greatest task when we talked to a relative or coworker about matters of faith and what Jesus meant to us.

Oh, it isn't like Jesus has gone into heaven and expects us to wing it. It is part of his plan. "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men. It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up (Ephesians 4.8, 11-12)." Through Jesus' gift of workers in the Lord's harvest field, millions upon millions of souls have been saved. Heaven is going to be filled. The message rings out no matter who stands in the pulpit, no matter who is in front of the classroom.

Oh, and there was another thing where Jesus was replaceable. Did you ever think where in the world Peter and the other apostles found sick people to miraculously heal? Jesus must have left them behind! He didn't cure every ill while he was on earth. There would be lots of work for the second shift to keep busy on. And there's still lots of work of work for the 21st century in Henderson, Nevada crew to keep busy. We will be reinvigorating our phone callers in the coming days. People are still pretty isolated and may be in need. We will be redoing our usher teams. We still need at least two per service to give directions if needed and make sure late comers get what they need to participate in worship. And we can't use the old crew of ushers, because I am not going to expose people in their 60s and 70s to those health risks. We are moving out of the lock-down phase and opening up. In part the work will be shouldered by the new generation.

There's lots of other things we could go into, but I hope I have proven my point.

Shepherds for the Sheep

1. No one is expendable (9.36-37, 10.5-8).
2. No one is irreplaceable (35, 38-10.4).

Next week we will be saying farewell to Pastor Kolander. We are sure he will be a wonderful addition to The Springs and carry on with the tradition of fine pastoral care they experienced under Pastor Hilmer. We are equally sure the congregation here at Green Valley Evangelical Lutheran Church will continue to receive superb pastoral care and be given opportunities to grow in faith through service. Jesus planned it that way, that there would always be shepherds for his sheep.