

St. John's Lutheran Church
June 15, 2008

"Time To Go To Work!"
Matthew 9:35 – 10:23

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

In 2001 St. John's Church established a companion relationship with a Lutheran congregation in the rural village of Muhanga in Tanzania, Africa. Over the last seven years that companion relationship has been lived out in a variety of ways. One of the suggestions that was made early on in the relationship was that it would be an appropriate and very good thing if the pastor of our congregation could make a visit to Muhanga. Such a visit would put official flesh on the skeleton of the relationship between our two congregations. For more than one reason I could not see my way in 2001 to consider making a trip of such magnitude.

But starting in 2004, Debbie and I began to talk about making a trip to Muhanga in 2008. The planning was very slow in the initial stages. And, in the meantime, others of our congregation actually made the trip. But starting in 2006 Debbie and I began to plan much more intentionally. That intentional planning included setting aside funds that we would need to accomplish the trip as well as deciding what kind of a group would be a good traveling group for us to join.

Last year the plans began to come together in a very real way. And the plans included Debbie and I volunteering to help chaperone a group of older youth from the St. Paul Area Synod who were planning to travel to Tanzania in the summer of 2008. And today it is hard to believe that this Wednesday Debbie and I will board a plane with 12 others in a group heading for Tanzania.

You can imagine, perhaps, the power with which the Gospel appointed for today hit me this week as I began my preparations for today's worship. For in this Gospel reading Jesus sends his followers out into the world on his behalf. It seemed to me like the Gospel had been appointed for today just for Debbie and me and our fellow travelers.

In the beginning of the Gospel reading, of course, it is just Jesus who is described as going out to the cities and the villages. Jesus is working alone. And what Jesus is doing is sharing the word of the Lord and caring for the people who he meets. And what impresses Jesus is how much the people he meets are in need of others to care for them.

And so it is that he calls together his twelve disciples and calls to their attention how much work there is to do out and about on behalf of the Lord. And he asks his disciples to pray for people who are willing and able to go out on behalf of the Lord to care for the people. Jesus said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Did you catch the irony of what happens as the very next thing in the Gospel reading? Right after Jesus asks his disciples to pray for persons to go out into the world on his behalf he recruits the disciples themselves to do that very thing. Instead of just letting them sit in comfort and pray for others to go out and care for the people, Jesus commands the ones whom he has asked to pray to be the ones who actually go.

And so it is that the disciples themselves head on out into the world on behalf of Jesus. And their mission is to proclaim the Gospel, care for the sick and the dying, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons. Their mission is to offer the love of God to all of those whom they meet in concrete and loving ways.

As I spent time with this Gospel this week I had a growing sense of Debbie and me following in the footsteps of those first disciples who headed out into the villages and cities on behalf of Christ. They did not know what kind of adventure lay before them. They were even forewarned that there would be difficult days ahead. But the encouragement they received was that they were being sent out by Christ himself.

So it is that Debbie and I step onto the first of a number of planes which will ultimately carry us to Africa on behalf of Christ and on your behalf as well. The journey begins this Wednesday at 3:30 in the afternoon. The highlight of the trip will be the three days and two nights that we actually spend in the remote village of Muhanga under the care of the pastor there. Three days does not seem like much time on a trip that totals twenty days. But we have been told that the impact of our visit will be huge upon the people there. And three days will be all that we can appropriately impose ourselves upon them.

What we will be doing while we are in Muhanga will be claiming them in an official way as our brothers and sisters in Christ. In a very personal way we will be saying to them that across the great sea, we belong to them in Christ. And that they belong to us in Christ. And that I am the pastor of the people they have heard so much about and from whom they have received support and encouragement in a variety of ways. I am told

that many if not most will remember our visit literally for the rest of their lives.

Along the way, we will be sent to other opportunities for spontaneous mission work. The Lutheran presence in Tanzania is great. We will volunteer in as many capacities as we find available to us in settings as diverse as a hospital, a school, or an orphanage. We will seek to be the presence of Christ to all whom we meet even as we open ourselves to be touched by the presence of Christ in them as well. Hold us in prayer. Amen.