

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

Energized for Mission

Isaiah 52: 7-12
Matthew 9: 32-10:1

Rev. Dr. Galen E. Russell III
October 4, 2009

Then he 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."

Prayer: Holy God, you reign in our lives. You go before us, you are our rear guard, and you are with us in the present day. Our hope, trust, and promise is in you. Amen.

I could not help but to think of Jake and Elwood Blues in the movie *The Blues Brothers* as I was preparing for this sermon. John Belushi and Dan Akroyd starred in the movie, and one memorable scene took place in the gospel church with singer James Brown as the preacher. The whole congregation was on their feet singing, dancing, praising God... and then all of a sudden heavenly beam of light illumines the whole building, and the light comes through the window, and illumines Jake. Jake receives the "holy" insight to get the band back together in order to raise \$5000 to save the Catholic orphanage from closing. A few minutes later, Elwood gets the same insight, and from that moment, Elwood says several times throughout the film, "We're on a mission from God." "They're not going to catch us because... we're on a mission from God. We're putting the band back together because... we're on a mission from God. We cannot fail... we're on a mission from God."

I am on fire for this Mission Trip to New Orleans! Oh my! There is so much need there! I feel like we're on a mission from God! Our theme, "Continuing Our Mission, Building New Hope—2010 Mission Trip" has that feeling to it, doesn't it? God is a part of this trip... God is a part of our church... God is a part of EVERYTHING we do here at Chapel Hill... our mission... our ministry. EVERYTHING!

I encourage us to have that mindset as we kickoff this journey to New Orleans today. It is not enough just to do a mission trip... it is not enough to go to New Orleans and work on houses. What we are doing is much more than that. Our entire Christian faith is wrapped around this mission trip. Everything about Christianity is involved, ranging from worship, to Bible study, to Sunday school children and adults doing things, to offering prayer services, to living out our faith, even saying grace at meals, or participating in daily devotionals... can we impact our trip... everything Christian is brought front and center as we share the responsibility of moving this trip from a vision into a reality.

It's true... right now our Mission Trip is a vision. And, there are several tasks we need to do leading up to the main task of working on inhabitable houses in New Orleans, making them habitable again. Vision and tasks need to go together. There is a church in Sussex, England built in 1730, and inscription on one of its walls reads, "A vision without a task is but a dream. A task without a vision is drudgery. A vision and a task are the

hope of the world” (from a church in Sussex, England, 1730, retrieved from http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustrations_for_installment.asp?installment_id=2835 on October 3, 2009).

We’ve had the vision for a number of years now. I’ve dreamed of making a trip to where there was need. I’ve shared with you in other sermons some of my experiences regarding previous mission trips when I was in Salt Lake City, how invigorating they were, and how I hoped we could do one. The vision has at its core a whole congregation being servants of God... a people intentionally living out faith, authentically sharing God’s love through a compassionate desire to help.

A few years ago though, the vision was without substantive tasks to do... and in that regard, it was but a dream. The tasks we can do are now before us. We have to plan. We have to raise money. We have to recruit thirty people. We have to pray together. And for the thirty participants, we will have to get our hands dirty. We will demolition moldy walls, and build new ones. We will strip peeling paint and apply new coats. We possibly will tear out worn out pipes and electrical wiring and install new stuff. Of course, all under the supervision of pros who will be there. All these tasks, though, without the vision are drudgery. They are daunting. Without the vision of being God’s servants at the core, who would want to do them?

Ah! But put the vision and the tasks together, right there is where the hope of the

world exists. We have the opportunity to continue our mission as a church, and build (pun intended) new hope for those without homes in New Orleans. I've heard there are upwards of 5000 homes still uninhabitable four years after Hurricane Katrina plowed through there! Wow! The harvest is ready! Our mission from God is to be the laborers who pray to the Lord of the harvest to send us out! Not just to make houses habitable, but also to bring God into someone's life.

You see, I think sometimes God plants seeds in the human heart that grow a need for God. God does this through physical circumstances, such as the demoniac who was mute and was brought to Jesus, or through those who were diseased or possessed. These physical circumstances enabled a need for God to grow within those individuals.

A need for God grows in people when disaster strikes, too. Think of what happened on 9-11... and in the aftermath, our whole nation in many respects cried out to God. We needed God. Hurricane Katrina hit and thousands groaned under its devastation, and a need for God was palpable. People in Indonesia and Samoa are feeling the need for God after the earthquakes last week. God may or may not cause these kinds of things, but I am willing to bet that the seeds of a need for people to cry out to God in the midst of these things are planted.

And, we who are not directly involved in the disaster are moved by the Holy Spirit, which in turn stirs our compassion and our sense of the value of human life. These are

seeds that God plants, too, and these seeds grow into a desire to help those in need. As we understand that need, we begin to be aware that God is looking for servants to go into the harvest field where victims of the disaster are longing for God. We are those people. We are called to go into the places where yes, houses need to be re-built, but most importantly, where there is work to be done in terms of bringing a person closer to God... bringing a person new hope. We are the people to bring someone God's light... someone who needs God to move their heart.

We are those people. We are the messengers who bring good news through our actions. We are the people energized for mission. We are those who sing for joy. We will be able to announce that God reigns, and that God has offered comfort through us to the people of God! God is here working through us to give hope to those who cannot live in their homes anymore.

The idea that God is working through us is underscored by this familiar story I've offered before. A woman was in McDonald's on a cold, clear morning. She writes, "We were standing in line, waiting to be served, when all of a sudden everyone around us began to back away, and then even my husband did. I did not move an inch. An overwhelming feeling of panic welled up inside me as I turned to see why they had moved. As I turned around I smelled a 'dirty body' smell, and there standing behind me were two poor, homeless men." They had a handful of coins and bought only coffee

because that was all they could afford. Acting on impulse, she bought two extra breakfasts and took them to the table where the men sat. The woman wrote, “I put the tray on the table and laid my hand on the blue-eyed gentleman’s hand. He looked up at me, with tears in his eyes, and said, ‘Thank you.’ I leaned over, began to pat his hand and said, ‘God is here working through me to give you hope.’” (Coy Wylie, “Stewardship ... Laborers or Loafers?” reprinted with permission from Coy Wylie, Cornerstone Church, August 30, 1998, [cornerstonebc.com](http://www.cornerstonebc.com), http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=3102, retrieved October 3, 2009).

Our mission trip to New Orleans is designed to let God work through us. It is set in the context of prayer—several of us participated in a 24 hour prayer vigil keeping this trip, our whole church, and our church’s ministry in prayer with God. This prayer vigil concludes with today’s worship service. Through prayer, God’s Holy Spirit energizes us for Mission, now and in the days to come.

Our mission trip is set in the context of it being an All-Church endeavor. Each of us as Christians can intentionally and authentically live out our Christian faith as we use our gifts, whether we are going on the trip or staying behind doing ministry here. Some of us will use our gifts as part of the thirty people going to New Orleans. Most of us will use our gifts by supporting the trip, praying for the participants, engaging in the projects to

raise awareness, funds, supplies, and resources. Knowing that our whole church is behind this mission trip energizes us for mission.

Our mission trip is set in the context of today's worship service, especially in the context of World Communion Sunday. In a few moments, we will recognize Christians who responded to the call to help in the wake of disasters and brought the light of Christ to many in need. This energizes us for mission.

After we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we will commission this trip as a mission event in the life our church's ministry. We will do several tasks which will lead us to the event itself. And, later on, closer to departure date, we will commission all the participants which will energize all of us for mission.

We are on a mission of God, going to where there is need, continuing our mission and building new hope. May God be with us. Amen.