

## BEST NOT DONE ALONE

There are some things in life that just can't be done by one person alone. Can you think of any?

Tug of war is one. Marriage is another. You can't date or have a deep conversation by yourself. It's impossible to hug alone. You can't even offer a simple, friendly handshake if there's no one on the other end of your hand.

Yes, it's true. No matter how strong our wishes or desires are, there are some things in life (perhaps more things than we care to acknowledge) that just aren't meant to be done by one person alone.

Try seesawing by yourself. Two people hanging wallpaper works much better than just one. A funny movie is even funnier when it's shared with someone else. And dinner at a restaurant tastes a lot better and is a lot more enjoyable when there's someone else sitting at the table with you.

It seems that it's not God's plan for some things to be experienced or done alone. Take the work of ministry. Ministering in Jesus' name isn't meant to be a solo activity. Which, of course, is why God created, and to this day is still creating, church communities like ours: groups of people serving the Lord together, working in unison and doing their part as individual members of the Body of Christ.

When Jesus was conducting his earthly ministry, he discovered that the work of sharing the Good News of God's kingdom was something best not done by himself. Even if it was possible for him to do that, at some point in time Jesus came to realize that doing it without help was impractical and inefficient. There were better, much more effective ways to share the Word and make sure it continued to be shared. And one of those ways was to add recruits, other helpers.

Matthew's Gospel described how Jesus perceived the hurt and brokenness around him. In the cities, towns and villages he traveled to, everywhere he looked, our Lord encountered people who yearned to hear a message of hope; who wanted the healing presence of God to come into their lives; who needed care and compassion.

Jesus' reaction probably wasn't any different that our own reaction to how fragmented and wounded the world is today. Watch the news on TV, scan

the Internet or read the front page of any newspaper and we can't help but think, "I knew things in the world were bad, but this bad?"

Although we may try to convince ourselves otherwise, the world hasn't changed much since Jesus' day. In fact, a strong argument could be made that things have been on a downward slide from then to now. Our world, like the world Jesus inhabited, contains so much heartache and heartbreak that at times it can be overwhelming. People everywhere—including here in our own great nation, the richest and most prosperous nation that ever existed, are living in pain, fear and despair; and we know that, as individuals, the little we might be able to do to help make things better is just a drop in the bucket.

When Jesus began to mix and mingle with the crowds the way he did in our reading from Matthew this morning, he recognized how desperation and misery had overtaken many people's lives. He saw countless people who were, as Matthew put it, "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

Maybe that was the moment when Jesus realized he couldn't adequately address all this pain, despair and need by himself. And even if he put his small band of twelve disciples to work, it wouldn't be enough to get the job done.

So Jesus did more than just tell his disciples to help him; he also urged them to pray for God to send many more workers into the field to assist in the great harvest of proclaiming good news to needy, hurting people. Jesus knew full well that his task was great; which is why he decided that the work God had sent him into the world to do was something best not done alone.

During those early days of Jesus' ministry, he came to understand that it was unreasonable and unrealistic to go about proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God by himself. Not only would it take longer than necessary to spread the Gospel, but he would have greater success if that message was also shared by his followers: those who had taken his message to heart and wanted to carry it forward.

If Jesus had decided to proclaim the Gospel alone, without any help, then when he died that message could very well have died with him. Jesus must have understood—instinctively if nothing else—that the kind of substantial change and social transformation he had in mind was most likely to happen and continue when ordinary people became enthusiastic advocates for it.

For Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God to become a reality, everyday people, moved by the Spirit of God, first had to be convinced that the teachings and principles of the Kingdom truly mattered and would make a real difference in the world. And those people would be the ones to share it and embody it. If Jesus' message was to take root and continue to spread, it needed to be proclaimed by more voices than just his. That's why he prayed and worked so

diligently to enlist others in helping him accomplish the Kingdom building mission he was on. And, as I'm sure you realize, it was from this recruitment of other workers to go into the harvest field and work to build up God's realm that the church sprung up. The church is a community of laborers working together in the field (the world) to bring in God's harvest. And the "harvest" is anyone who hasn't already heard or responded to Jesus' call to believe in him and follow him.

So, what is the end result that you and I and all Christians are being called to strive toward? What was the ultimate purpose Jesus wanted to see come about?

Robert McAfee Brown, a Presbyterian minister and professor of theology, wrote something that I think can help us envision the goal we're seeking as we work together in God's field. He penned the following reflection in response to the question, "What is the meaning of life?"

"Ralph Sumner died the other day, full of years (eighty-plus) and wisdom (dairy farmer, cabinetmaker, member of the local road crew, and churchgoer). When we laid him in the ground there were some tears, but there was also a lot of gratitude for the joy he had spread around the folk of Heath, Massachusetts.

Ralph's death made me think about my own life and our mutual human purpose.

"I believe we are placed here [on earth] to be companions—a wonderful word that comes from the Latin *cum panis* (with bread). We are here to share bread with one another so that everyone has enough, no one has too much, and our social order achieves this goal with maximal freedom and minimal coercion.

"There are many names for such sharing: "Utopia, the beloved community, the communion of saints, the Kingdom of God. And while the goal of bringing to reality such loving, caring companionship is far too vast to be brought to fruition solely on this planet, it is our calling and task as Christians to create foretastes of it—to offer the world living glimpses of what life according to God's will is supposed to be and will be after Christ returns at the end of the age.

"This foretaste includes things such as art and music and poetry and shared laughter and picnics and politics and moral outrage and special privileges for children only, and wonder and humor and endless, immeasurable love—enough love to counterbalance the otherwise immobilizing realities that exist of tyrants, starving children, death camps, and just plain greed.

"But," MacAfee concluded, "I expect that our deceased friend Ralph Sumner now sees such a world more clearly than I do."

My friends, by its very nature, and because it's such a lofty goal that Christ our Lord has set for us as harvesters for God, the work we Christians are called to is best not done alone. It is most effectively done by all of us. Together. Many

different individual Christians and churches of every denomination working in the field side-by-side, harvesting for God as a united community. That's the only way we can possibly hope to accomplish any of God's work.

By the way, that work isn't meant to be done just within these church walls. We're called to go out and do it in the everyday, rough-and-tumble world in which we live: the dirty, gritty places around us where we encounter the helpless, the harassed, and the hungry. That's where the good news of God's compassion, justice, and mercy most desperately need to be proclaimed and heard.

Of course, going to such places it will be risky and uncomfortable, to say the least. It might also be distressing and unpleasant, discouraging and despairing. And at times it can even be dangerous, as we saw this past week on an Alexandria, Virginia baseball field when a shooter opened fire on some Republican representatives with an automatic rifle, and a significantly outgunned Capital Police security detail for one of the congressmen, along with some responding police officers, heroically risked their lives to defend the unarmed victims and prevent a massacre. They acted in a sacrificial, Christ-like manner, and two of them got wounded in the process. They could have very easily been killed, along with many other people, but they did it anyway.

Such is the risky field we're called to harvest in. But it's imperative that the message of God's Kingdom and God's love be proclaimed even more boldly and emphatically the face of such senseless, horrific violence, irrational hatred and destructive anger. And because of the risks and challenges we face for announcing the Good News of the Gospel in a world full of violence, hatred and anger, it's best not done alone.

My friends, just as it was in Jesus' day, in 2017 the harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few. Jesus has put out the call. Many more hands are needed. God's labor force encompasses the whole people of God, all the disciples of Jesus, each of us supporting, encouraging and helping one another; working, sharing bread and worshipping God together.

We're to do this to give people a foretaste of God's Kingdom, and show the world what God's love, grace and compassion look like when they're lived out in the flesh. It's a daunting task, to be sure; and we take it on with the full realization that we will never be able to completely accomplish it. What the Lord is asking of us is to do what we can, the best that we can, to accomplish whatever small portion of God's harvest we're able to get done. And along with that, we're also urged to pray fervently, just as our Lord did, for God to encourage more people to come join us in the field: people who understand, as you and I do, that following Christ and doing God's work in this world can be

very difficult, challenging and risky; so it's best not done alone. Amen.