

s-P6A-08-Your Assignment, If You Decide to Accept It
Mt. 9:35-38 *The harvest is plentiful*
Mt. 10:1-15 *Instructions from Jesus*
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YOUR ASSIGNMENT, IF YOU DECIDE TO ACCEPT IT

"Your assignment, if you decide to accept it..." Remember that line from the old "Mission: Impossible" TV show? A disembodied but chatty voice on a tape recorder would tell Jim Phelps, the hunky guy with silver hair, all about the dangerous mission *du jour*. Then the tape recorder would catch on fire. Week after week, tape recorder after tape recorder: click, foosh, sizzle. It's a good thing the Mission: Impossible team never seemed to turn down an assignment. Otherwise, it would've been difficult to justify all those ruined tape players.

Sometimes I think our assignments from God are about as mysterious and disembodied as that voice on the TV show tape. Information about our mission often comes to us in unconventional ways. God may not plainly describe the job we're being given. And God may only imply the extent of the risk involved.

And like the disembodied voice of the leader on the "Mission: Impossible" tape, God seems to leave it up to us to make decisions about choosing a team, planning and executing the task, and—worst of all—dealing with the fallout.

In "Mission: Impossible," the episode always seemed to end with Barney's electrical gadget working perfectly, Willy pulling away in the panel van without pursuit, and Rollin and Cinnamon ripping off the latex masks that had so successfully disguised them as the King and Queen of Pottsylvania that they were able to fool the Crown Prince into signing the secret peace treaty.

All the sweating, all the anxiety, all the scenes of our heroes shiftily eying each other to see if anybody has caught on to their shenanigans—all that effort and angst seemed so worthwhile by the time the credits rolled over the freeze-frame perfect ending.

The missions in our real-time lives don't always end so neatly. There are often a lot of loose ends, leftover parts, hanging chads, and returnable bottles. It would be so nice, wouldn't it, to just jump in the van and take off that suffocating mask and be done with work for the day? Instead, for you and me, life continues beyond the rolling of the credits—all those sweaty jumpsuits need to be laundered, the van's about out of gas, and our faces get pimples from the latex. Not only that, but the cost of copper wire has doubled, we've gotten too fat to fit

through the air ducts, and it's time for the old blonde to get her roots done again.

And if that weren't enough, when reality sets in, we may never even get the satisfaction of knowing how it all turned out, and whether or not we did the job God wanted us to do!

Well, fortunately for us, the missions we're assigned don't include the items that Jesus gave to his twelve apostles: proclaim the good news, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.

And we're not give the same restrictions that Jesus gave the apostles, either: take no money with you, no luggage, no extra clothes or shoes—not even a walking stick! And don't stop at Burger King; you can only eat what folks offer to you. And no Motel 6, either—stay in people's houses as long as they'll let you, and then move on!

But wait a minute—is it true that we're exempt from Jesus' instructions? I didn't hear Jesus say, "This is your assignment, if you *decide* to accept it."

What if the mission of the apostles is our mission, too?

Now that's something to chew on!

What if the moment we are baptized, the tape recorder catches on fire and we're stuck with the job of being a Christian? That's a pretty daunting assignment! Proclaim the gospel? Cure the sick?? Raise the dead, for heaven's sake??? And I don't even *know* any lepers or demons!

But, as usual, it's not going to help us to take Jesus' words at face value and freak out. Sure, it's a real challenge he's giving us, but it's not going to help us reach our goal if we give up on the journey before we even take the first step.

So let's unpack this little bundle that Jesus has thrown into our laps.

"Proclaim the good news." That sounds very high-and-mighty. Sounds like something we'd need at least a college degree for. Maybe graduate school! And a lot of specialized training, and a good measure of public speaking experience. Toastmasters, at least. AND we'd need to be able to quote chapter and verse, so of course we'd need to memorize the entire Bible, and read a passel of scholarly commentaries, and learn to write sermons and to preach without notes. AND we'd need to be completely sincere, always accurate and correct, have perfect timing, and know exactly what to say and when to say it.

Right? That's what the apostles did—right?

No, of course not. If they went to school at all, it was probably just to learn to read and write. Matthew, the tax collector, probably could do some math—

using Roman numerals, naturally. And they couldn't quote chapter and verse, since the New Testament hadn't been written yet and only Synagogues had Torah scrolls. And they sure as heck never joined Toastmasters.

Were they completely sincere? Probably some were and some weren't. Were they always accurate and correct? That would be impossible. Did they always know what to say and when to say it? No, I bet they put their feet in their mouths about as often as you and I would.

One thing they did do, however, is preach without notes. And by that I don't mean that they got up in the pulpit and delivered carefully-prepared formal sermons. What I mean is that they spoke off the cuff, informally, about their faith, their community, and about what it meant to have Jesus Christ in their lives. They spoke with passers-by in the town square. They spoke over dinner in people's houses. They mentioned things in passing, and caught people's attention, and answered folks' questions the best they could.

Probably, if they had them available, they would've worn God is Still Speaking T-shirts and comma buttons, just to have something to break the ice.

Were they trying to lure members to join their local church? Evangelize sinners into being saved? Nope. Their assignment, and they DID choose to accept it, was simply to *share the good news*. Not to keep it to themselves. Let as many people know about it as was humanly possible; expose the public to the simple but radical idea that it was possible to be free, to be forgiven, and to live a life full of meaning. They were simply inviting people to be introduced to Jesus. Nothing more, nothing less.

OK, so we could probably handle that. But what about the second part of the assignment? "Cure the sick"? The physicians and nurses in our congregation could probably do that. A few of you are Eagle Scouts; you could probably whip up a tourniquet out of shoelaces or make an emergency splint out of Popsicle sticks.

And the rest of us, hopefully, know where the band-aids are stored.

But do we really think that Jesus means that all of us, literally, are supposed to go out and fix sick and injured bodies? Practice medicine without a license? Or is it possible that Jesus was being more subtle than that?

I'd say so. Some of us, of course, DO have special talents and specialized training, whether in physical medicine or spiritual healing. But even the average Christian has a skill that is guaranteed to help even the sickest patient: and that is *prayer*.

Prayer is a wonderfully flexible medication. Anybody can apply it, and it works on just about any disease or injury. It can be taken at any time of day, with or without meals. The dose can be quite tiny, almost undetectable; or it can be

repeated for years without causing debilitating side effects. It's free and it's universally effective. Best of all, it works even when the diagnosis isn't perfectly understood. We, the ones given the assignment, don't really need to figure out how to fix the problem. We don't need to know whether the sickness is in the body, mind or spirit, or situational, or societal, or even imaginary. What wonderful, wonderful medicine is prayer!

But—"Raise the dead"? Now we're getting into the realm of genuine impossibility. Or are we? Last week's sermon was entitled, "I See Dead People." And in the story about the woman who touched Jesus' cloak and the official who asked Jesus to bring his daughter back to life, we explored different ways that people might be considered dead: socially, spiritually, physically.

And that's not counting those of us who are just plain "dead on our feet"!

Perhaps the reign of God is advanced enough that you or I *could* bring someone back from physical death; I don't know. Miracles still happen; I've seen it.

But all of us *do* have the potential to bring life back to someone who is dead to the world because they are outcast, or down and out, or have lost their will to live, or are simply so exhausted by the demands of living day to day that they don't think they can take another step. We can all do that, and we **DO** do that. We do it all the time, without thinking about the ramifications of what we're doing. Keep it up, apostles! It's what makes life worth living and it makes your Father in Heaven very, very happy.

Then, how about—"Cleanse the lepers"? Not so very different from raising people from the dead. Lepers in Jesus' time were worse than outcast. Their disease was considered so contagious that they were prohibited from all human contact. They were expected to hide themselves away from "normal" people, never bothering anyone, always keeping far away from everyday life. If they died—and they did die—so much the better. If they suffered—and boy, did they suffer—it must be God's will.

Nowadays, of course, we know that leprosy, or Hansen's Disease, isn't even very contagious and that sickness of any kind is never God's will. Still, we like people who are so very different from us to stay out of sight and out of mind. People with severe developmental disabilities, for instance. Addicts, and cripples, and schizophrenics, and folks with lots of facial scars. People with Tourette's Syndrome, who say peculiar things. Autistic folks with flat affect and toneless voices. Deformed people and deaf people and people whose cancer isn't controlled; people who've suffered strokes and can't talk worth a darn. We don't

like to look at them or interact with them—although, of course, we make exceptions for members of our own families.

What if “cleanse the lepers” just means accepting and including these folks in the life of the living. Letting go of the way difference taints our thinking. Being inclusive and loving and, yes, blind—for there are none so blind as those who refuse to see. That may be our task, if we choose to accept it: to declare no man, woman, or child unclean and not fit for human interaction. To refuse to see the difference.

And finally, we come to the real clincher. How in the name of all that’s holy are we supposed to “cast out demons”? Well, what ARE demons, anyway? How do we define them in this day and age? A colloquial term might be “the monkey on your back.” Obsessions. Addictions. Compulsions. Worries that won’t go away. Phantoms from the past that won’t lie at rest. Unrelenting guilt. Unreasonable need. Insatiable desire.

How can we, as average Christian citizens, help ourselves—let alone others—cast out the demons that make their lives a misery? Good question. “See above!”

First, *proclaim the good news*. Share Christ, and the ways that following Christ can transform lives. Let them know where help can be found—spiritual comfort, physical assistance, acceptance and a sense of community... don’t keep quiet when the things you know just might be exactly what someone needs. A word cast upon the waters now may come back much later in terms of bread that can nourish and save.

Second, *cure the sick*. Pray, pray, and pray some more. Pray for the one who is suffering. Even better, pray WITH the one who is suffering. A burden shared is truly a burden halved. Be willing to take on some of that burden and pass it on to God. Jesus said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” The yoke is easy because we’re teamed with God. The burden is light because God takes on most of the weight.

Third, *raise the dead*. Let them know you accept them as they are, even while you hope and pray for their deliverance from what is killing them. Offer to walk with them, or help them find the appropriate assistance or supportive community. Most of us aren’t equipped to wrestle with demons, but we are all capable of showing kindness, and having some patience, and making a phone call or two.

So, when Jesus tells us to get out there and be apostles, he isn’t really asking us to perform miracles. *Or maybe he IS*. However we see the task we are

given by God, it is our personal, sacred, and do-able assignment—if we decide to accept it. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Lord, we try so hard just to be disciples. Could it be that you really expect us to be *apostles*? That it might be possible for us to do as they did, following Jesus' instructions? That we, too, might be given assignments that look impossible, but are actually well within our capability?

Holy God, if you send us out, equip us with all we need to sustain us. If you give us a task, help us to understand and to do your will. If you send us out on a journey, walk with us and guide us and grant us the Spirit we need. Amen.