



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

4th Sunday after Pentecost: July 7, 2019

Sermon Title: "Blessed to Serve"

Gospel Text: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Over the last twenty years or so, it has become trendy in church circles for congregations to hire consultants. These consultants, using the accumulated wisdom of the corporate world, offer advice as to how the Church can operate more efficiently and effectively. Often times it can be helpful. But the Church is an institution like no other. Even the very best of the world's wisdom sometimes doesn't work within this strange, perplexing, and sometimes even wonderful thing we call the Church.

For example, consider, today's Gospel lesson. Can you imagine a consultant advising Jesus on the state of his movement, and the recommendations the consultant might make? It might sound something like this: "Jesus, you've got a pretty good thing going here. I see real potential in this movement of yours. After all, you're the Son of God. You have *real power... eternal potential... the skies the limit!* But to be candid, Jesus, there are some areas where you need to make a few changes."

"You see, Jesus, you've got serious personnel issues. If you really want this movement of yours to take off, you have to fire all your disciples and dismiss all your volunteers. They have no qualifications for the job. They have no relevant experience. In fact, quite a few of them have really questionable backgrounds. Don't you screen your people? You've surrounded yourself with a cast of unsavory characters, crooks, and misfits. And are you aware of the rumors circulating about your man Judas, and all the secret meetings he's been having with the Temple Authorities? You don't need these headaches. You're divine! You can do it all yourself! So here's the bottom line Jesus – if you want your Church to succeed, you have to get rid of all the people."

So, what do you think? The consultant makes a fair point, right? Jesus doesn't *need* us in order to accomplish his mission. In fact, the opponents of Christianity like to argue that church people have *caused* at least as many problems as they've *solved*. There's a certain amount of truth to that charge. Throughout history and down to the present day we all can point to examples of churches that have willingly subjected children and women to abuse in order to protect power, and churches that have pursued wealth and prestige over love and service. It has happened in massive, worldwide church institutions, we have seen it unfold at popular TV ministries, and it even happens in little country churches.

None of this should surprise or discourage us because as today's Gospel reminds us, Jesus has chosen to operate his Church through people, and as long as people sin, that sin will continue to adversely influence the Church and its impact in the world. What's really

remarkable to me is *not* that the Church is filled with broken people, but that the Church has managed to survive and persevere for 2,000 years *despite* the brokenness of its people. Even with the many faults the Church and church people have committed over the centuries, Jesus's Church is still standing, long after other institutions and worldwide empires have fallen into ruins. Perhaps the Church's astonishing perseverance is the greatest testimony of the divine foundation of this thing we call the Church. It endures and even thrives not because of *us*, but because of *Jesus*.

Nevertheless, the consultant's question has merit. Why does Jesus insist on proclaiming his message and carrying out his work through his broken and fallible people? Well, when I study this Gospel reading and the work of the Seventy, and when I see so many of you acting as God's hands and feet of mercy in this world, it becomes apparent that this is Jesus's way of bringing about a *simultaneous double blessing*. In other words, Jesus uses us to serve others, because in doing so, he's able to bless and transform us as well. That blessing we receive takes three forms: (1) we grow in our love for the people *with whom* we serve; (2) we grow in our love for the *people* we serve; and (3) we grow in our love for *God*.

I see this pattern in the *scores* of volunteers who serve God's people here at Grace. But let's explore this more fully by more closely examining just one of the many groups of volunteers at Grace who selflessly and joyfully give their time and their hearts to serve others through the Church.

My contact with this group usually begins at about 4 pm each Wednesday during the fall and spring here at Grace. That's the time our Super Wednesday cooking crew takes a well-deserved break to share a cup of coffee and a snack. I love to sit at the table with them as they talk about their lives, their joys, and their challenges. The love this team has for one other is plainly evident. Some of them are fairly new to the group while others have been working together for years. But that time working shoulder-to-shoulder each Super Wednesday has forged them into a true team that loves one another. That's a significant blessing to these people who serve a delicious meal to nearly 200 people every Wednesday.

That meal illustrates the second form of blessing we receive when we serve in Christ's Church. Our Super Wednesday team has developed great love for the people they serve. They invest attention, detail, and care into every attendee and every meal. From the folks who buy the groceries to the ones who mash the potatoes, love is the ever-present ingredient for this team, because they know they're providing more than a meal; they're providing an opportunity for faith to grow and relationships to bloom.

Finally, it wouldn't be out of line to think that these people who work so very hard on Wednesday evenings deserve a break after all that toil. And yet these are the very people who are among our most regular church attenders on Sunday morning. Why? Because of that third blessing we receive from service within the Church: their love of God has grown with each egg they crack and each slice of meatloaf they serve.

Again, I hasten to add that though I've highlighted our Super Wednesday team today, I see this happening all throughout our church. And so to Sunday School teachers, ushers,

worship assistants, and everyone who serves here at Grace: *thank you*. You are blessing others. But in the course of doing so, I hope you see that Jesus is blessing *you* too. This is why Jesus defies the world's wisdom and invites us, despite our flaws, to participate *with him* in his work rather than doing it all himself.

One final observation though. This miracle of a double blessing is possible because, as today's Gospel illustrates, Jesus calls us to a very special kind of service. We do not serve in order to glorify ourselves by seeking praise or adulation. To the contrary, we serve in utter vulnerability, like lambs amidst wolves, carrying nothing but Christ's peace and mercy, and depending not upon our own resources and talents but only on God's grace. Any good we accomplish we attribute solely to God's power. We invite, not compel. And everything we do is saturated with love.

The Seventy whom Jesus sent out came back astonished at what God could accomplish through them when they approached their work in humble, sacrificial love, trusting in God's ability to work miracles through the simplest of means. Thanks be to God, that miracle is being repeated on a daily basis here at Grace. Even a church consultant would be impressed. So let's not just *go* to Church; let's *be* the Church by serving *together*, because Jesus is calling us to bless the *world*, and in the course of doing so, he is inviting *us* to *be* blessed as well. Amen.