

“Learning by Doing”
Psalm 119:97-112, Luke 9:1-6
Sunday, October 8, 2023
Pastor David Witt

Luke 9:1-6, *The Message*

¹⁻⁵ Jesus now called the Twelve and gave them authority and power to deal with all the demons and cure diseases. He commissioned them to preach the news of God’s kingdom and heal the sick. He said, “Don’t load yourselves up with equipment. Keep it simple; *you* are the equipment. And no luxury inns—get a modest place and be content there until you leave. If you’re not welcomed, leave town. Don’t make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and move on.”

⁶ Commissioned, they left. They traveled from town to town telling the latest news of God, the Message, and curing people everywhere they went.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Author of Life, Living Word, Holy Breath, we have stumbled through the week and groped our way back to this place. Plow our hearts with your living Word until we who are broken become fruitful with your love. Illumine the steps before us in this new week and write your word on our hearts, for we carry the name of Jesus and want to walk in the light of his life as we learn by doing. Amen.

Many of you have heard the newfound adage, “If I knew ahead of time that having grandchildren was so much fun, I would

have had them first!” Indeed, Carole and I love being grandparents, although our kids are each pretty special too. Joel was born less than a year after Carole and I began ministry at our church in Waynesboro, and then Ryan and Rebekah were born within the next four years. Each of them was in worship from the time they were two weeks old, and I give Carole all the credit in the world for handling them each Sunday and, much of the time, because I was often out visiting or at meetings. But I discovered last Sunday something that I don’t recall experiencing with our own three: because Knox heard my voice and looked right up here at me, staring with his eyes, and brightening with his smile, he might very well get me in trouble in the future! I wanted to make faces back and play peek-a-boo, not quite befitting a pastor. I think much of the glee we have as grandparents, besides not usually having to carry the weight and responsibility for raising them, comes from having time to watch and observe our grandchildren, to appreciate their human and faith development, and how they are constantly learning by doing. Carole and I

looked at Knox last week and were astounded by how he has learned to grasp things even in those little hands and eat and crawl and pay attention and clap and interact, and he's not even a year old. Imagine the growth ahead for him. Frankly, I have a hard time remembering all the ages and stages of life with each of our children because we were in fact not only trying to maintain but survive. So, bless all our parents and grandparents for all you do in nurturing your wee and growing ones, who are so dear to us at church as well. The development we experience as children of God is absolutely incredible!

But, you and I know full well that this life-long development cannot be marked by a straight line angling upward. We move ahead in spurts and fits, sometimes more in waves or at best jaggedness. And that is especially true as we learn by doing. We discover, we fail, we achieve, we progress, we go backwards, we reassess, revisit, and recalibrate. Sometimes we even spiral. Straight line? Not so much. But we learn and grow from doing, from falling down and getting back up again; from messing up and

correcting; from realizing dreams and reevaluating our vision and goals. This is true for us as individuals, as families, and even as the church; but a unique facet of the church is that as the baton of legacy and inheritance has been passed, we have had a long time to figure it out, almost 2000 years for the Church of Jesus Christ, over 290 years for Opequon Church!

Jesus gathers the Twelve. These disciples have been following him for a while now. They are committed and engaged, well, most of the time. If we were to walk in their shoes, and maybe sometimes we do, we would discover what author John MacArthur writes in his book, *Twelve Ordinary Men*: “they weren’t saints, and they weren’t scholars; they weren’t even religious sages. The disciples Jesus chose were ordinary, hopelessly human, and remarkably unremarkable: a handful of common fishermen, a hated tax collector, and an impulsive political zealot. But they were available and obedient to the Master’s call. And under Jesus’ teaching and touch, they became a force that forever changed the world, and each of our lives.”

First, as disciples, students and learners, they tracked Jesus and watched what he was doing: how he treated them and treated others; how he reached out and met people where they were at and lifted them up, blessing them and inviting them to grow and change as they followed; how he forgave and healed; how he taught and preached; how he shared the good news of God's kingdom through both word and deed, announcing justice and righteousness, enacting inclusion and fairness. For as Luke emphasizes earlier in the gospel, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The disciples have seen love in action.

But now a turning point comes: Jesus gathers the Twelve. He calls them together and then sends them out. They are about to embark on a new stage in their development as children of God and disciples. Their apprenticeship is taking on a new meaning.

They will no longer simply observe as spectators; they are going to get in the game as participants, as primary players, as leaders of this mission to change lives and change the world. They are going to be the hands, heart, and feet of Christ. They will now learn by doing, putting into practice what they have seen and heard. Jesus “gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He said to them, ‘Take nothing for your journey: no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.’ So, they departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.”

“Did Jesus desert them? Did Jesus throw them in the deep end?” you and I might wonder. Well, he has been teaching them all along their journey together. Have they always listened?

Hmmm. What about us? Do we always listen? They have spent time with Jesus. Have they always watched him and valued their time together? Hmmm. What about us? Do we always watch and value our time with Jesus and God's word to us? Jesus does give them power and authority, though we may not be satisfied with the sheer ambiguity here. With the power and authority Jesus gave them, they were transformed into courageous preachers and healers. For Jesus can turn our weaknesses into strengths for His own sake. He also gives them instructions about their focus and tells them to not be deterred by reticence and frustration, resistance and failure. Don't get bogged down by material stuff! And don't lose sight of the vision of the good news of the kingdom! So, they are sent out as both disciples and as apostles, to serve together, as we sang in our hymn moments ago "united by love, inviting God's world to the glorious feast, working and praying through sorrow and joy, extending God's love to the last and the least." But Jesus does not step completely out of the picture. He still travels with them, for his earthly journey is not yet

finished, and won't be until he proclaims that message from the cross.

Were these apostles as the sent ones always successful? Were they always faithful? No, not at all. They confronted adversity in towns and villages. They wavered and wondered, and as Jesus continued to preach and teach, they struggled with some of the nuances and emphatic priorities of his message. And we know what happened during the last week of Jesus' life. While some followers stayed the course all the way to the foot of the cross, the Twelve betrayed, denied, and fled. And yet, the Church of Jesus Christ was built and nurtured through disciples and apostles, male, female, young, old, those who learned by doing as they were sent out. And followers of Jesus have not ceased to make a difference through their worship and service, their witness and sacrifice.

In his book, *The Witness of Preaching*, Tom Long tells the story of Grace Wilkey Thomas, a laywoman from First Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia, who went from being a full-time wife

to a full-time employee to a full-time student to ultimately running for governor of Georgia. Mrs. Thomas stood on the word of God as a modern-day disciple and apostle, running twice for governor in the Democratic primary. The historical context for her life included the state elections of 1954 in Georgia, the recently decided *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* Supreme Court case and decision, and the volatility of the civil rights movement of the 1960's. Her political fate – sure defeat – was never in doubt, as she finished last in each of those contests; however, she was faithful and was a courageous witness to how Christ had changed her and called her to make a difference in the world through learning by doing. And though success according to the world's standards was not an outcome, Mrs. Thomas spoke up and out about working together for the common good, peacefully testifying as the hands, heart, and feet of Christ to what Lincoln proclaimed as the “better angels of our nature.” Tom Long sets forth the example of Grace Wilkey Thomas to claim that God calls everyone and that responding to that call may propel an

individual to previously inconceivable opportunities for witness and service.

Here we are today, my friends! If Christ can accomplish his purposes through the lives of common people like those first disciples, and through a humble servant like Grace Wilkey Thomas, imagine what Jesus has in store for you and me! By living as Christ's followers in our heart, our life becomes a witness to the truth of Jesus' mission. For all of us are called to become missionaries. We may not be sent to faraway lands, but we can be missionaries in our family, to our friends, and within our workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and communities. We don't have authority of our own, but we do have authority from Jesus. The message of our generosity emphasis – God's fingerprints, on the world and on us – reflects that we learn and grow and serve by doing. That's the mission for this new week as we are sent out. But remember, remember, remember what we must never forget: you and I never go alone. For Jesus says, "I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."