

Collaborators

Matthew 9:35—10:8

The 1963 movie *Lilies of the Field*, based on the novel of the same name by William Edward Barrett, garnered a groundbreaking Oscar for actor Sidney Poitier, the first African American to win the coveted award. The story is set in the Arizona desert. Poitier portrays an itinerant laborer named Homer Smith, who pulls off the road seeking water for his battered car's radiator. He discovers a group of impoverished nuns, refugees from war-torn Europe, now eking out a living from the dry soil. The Mother Superior believes Homer Smith's accidental arrival is God's answer to her prayers for someone who will come and build a chapel of adobe bricks on the ruins of an earlier failed attempt.

Homer sees it differently. He asks to be paid for some repairs he made around the primitive convent, quoting Luke 10:7, "... the laborer is worthy of his hire." She responds by quoting Matthew 6:28, "Consider the lilies of the field"

As the story progresses, Homer, a Baptist, ends up building that chapel, finding a part-time construction job to help pay for materials. Like Mother Superior, he also has a dream — he always wanted to be an architect. But he exhausts himself with crushing labor in the hot sun.

A crucial scene in the movie comes when his dedication inspires many of the Hispanic day laborers in the region to donate materials and labor, which leads to a crisis for Homer. If he allows others to help, will it still be his accomplishment? His pride causes him to quit — temporarily.

Soon he realizes his skills in design and supervision coupled with the back-breaking labor that others gladly share makes this uniquely both his triumph and the community's accomplishment as well.

When the chapel is completed, Homer quietly drives off, becoming a figure in local legend, while the new chapel becomes not only the home for a community's life of worship, but also the launch pad for planned schools and hospitals to be part of a growing ministry.

Homer Smith struggled with the idea of working with collaborators. Well, if anyone could ever accomplish everything without the help of collaborators, it was certainly Jesus. He was able to feed the multitudes by simply blessing and breaking bread. When it came to healing, he did not even need to be present. Nor did he have to be told to know what people needed.

This week's scripture passage begins with a short statement that encompasses one of the longest periods of time described in the gospels. That may sound like a contradiction in terms but it's not. Jesus speaks for three-and-a-half chapters in the Gospel of John, following the Last Supper, from John 13:17 to the end of chapter 17. It's the longest speech in the gospels, but the words can be spoken in a matter of minutes.

Compare that with the contentious dialog Jesus engaged in with religious leaders during the final week

preceding his crucifixion. Each of these encounters, no matter how wordy, are over in a few seconds of reading.

But consider these simple words from our reading today: “Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in the synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.”

Matthew the Evangelist is describing not just days, but weeks or even months: the journeys between the various cities and villages, the hours spent speaking and the same for healing. This long period of time represents a success story.

The problem is that his deep-felt compassion leads him to lament to his disciples that the work of the kingdom requires more collaborators — more laborers to bring in the harvest. Sheep, shepherd and harvest may add up to a bit of a mixed metaphor, but that’s no obstacle. What matters is that the one who is more qualified — more self-sufficient, than anyone in history — nevertheless feels the need for collaborators. Which, in turn, leads to the calling of the 12 apostles, who we might, in these circumstances, call the 12 collaborators.

Why 12? One response might well be: Why not? But more to the point, it seems likely that Jesus is drawing a direct parallel between the twelve tribes of Israel and these twelve special disciples. During the era of the great prophets, after Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and led 10 tribes into exile, the great sense of incompleteness led to the prophetic promise that all God’s people would one day return and be one.

Later, the two tribes of the southern kingdom, Judah and Benjamin, were themselves led into exile by the Babylonians. A couple of generations later they were permitted to return to their homeland. Yet there was still a feeling of being incomplete. Ten tribes were missing.

In fact, had there been DNA tests available, they would no doubt have shown that all twelve tribes were represented in the populations of Judea and Galilee. However, this was not a matter of scientific accuracy — it spoke to the feeling of incompleteness. These twelve apostles were chosen in part to show that God’s kingdom is one of wholeness and homecoming.

Today, we as the Body of Christ are meant to represent wholeness and homecoming as well. We are complete when we are all together, and everyone, no matter how they may have strayed, should be able to consider our church home. And this year, when we actually come back together, we will feel complete once again.

Keep in mind that 12 is also a very convenient number for people who did not think mathematically in terms of base 10. The zero as a placeholder would not be incorporated into Western mathematics for a thousand years. You didn’t talk in terms of the ones place, or the tens place or the hundreds place. Twelve was a great number in a bartering economy, because you could divide it by six, four, three and two. The apostles could be sent out in groups of various sizes. Twelve as a number speaks not only to our completeness, but to our identities as small groups within a larger group, as well as our versatility in going out to do God’s work.

But if we are sent out as collaborators of Christ to a suffering world in need of healing, teaching and belonging, the nature of our collaboration is suggested by the meaning of the word “apostle.” Some government emissaries are sent with strict instructions regarding what they are to do or to say. They may not improvise or renegotiate. They must do exactly as they are told.

An apostle, however, is a different sort of emissary. Those sent out as apostles are true collaborators. Though they may leave with clear instructions or strategies, they are also empowered to tailor their actions according to the circumstances as they find them. They may improvise, and they may do so with the blessing of the one who sent them.

In the Nero Wolfe novels, written by the late Rex Stout, the sedentary detective often sends out his more active partner Archie Goodwin (who narrates the novels) to collect information, interview a source or take action. Though sometimes precise, often enough Wolfe’s instructions to Archie are simply to act “using his intelligence guided by experience.” That’s the sort of apostle we’re called to be when we go out as the Body of Christ.

Jesus often referred to elements of daily life in his teaching — shepherds, sowers, day laborers, homemakers, lawyers, scholars, the rich, the poor, fathers, mothers and harvesters. These are still part of our world, to be sure, but our daily lives also include things like marketers, programmers, mechanics, truck drivers, professional athletes, as well as broadcast television, virtual reality, smartphones and the internet. We are meant to share the compassion of the shepherd Jesus for these “harassed and helpless” sheep.

The names of the 12 apostles do not necessarily tell us much about these collaborators, and neither do the gospel accounts. There are brothers and total strangers. There are those who fish for a living, militaristic fanatics like Simon the Zealot, a tax collector (part of a hated profession), changeable personalities like Peter and even one who turned out to be a betrayer.

Perfection is not a requirement for membership in this body of collaborators, nor are our tasks meant to be equal in expenditure of energy or time of commitment. We don’t have the same skills, the same outlook or the same politics. If you’ve seen the film *Lilies of the Field*, you may remember that one who donated materials was the skeptical owner of a construction firm. Another was the nonbelieving owner of the café. Some donated chandeliers or stained glass. Others were stained with sweat as they carried heavy loads up and down the ramps as the chapel was built. Mother Superior was the great overseer, and Homer Smith was the brains behind the operation. All had something to do. All were important collaborators. Some would be clearly remembered. Others might only be recalled as a name mentioned in passing.

But they, like us, all have a part in the great work of Jesus Christ. Like Jesus, we are not only called to great ministries, but to be collaborators, calling out new apostles and mentoring each other so we are up to the task of sharing the ministry. May God’s Holy Spirit equip us, strengthen us and enable us, his disciples at the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, to be Christ’s great collaborators in reaching out to others with the Good news of the Gospel!!!!!!

Amen!