

There was a skit we used to do back in the day at camp called "God's Love." Here's how it goes: Linda finds herself in need of some of God's Love. She prays earnestly and receives a great big blob of it. She's pretty proud of that love and holds it out for everyone to see. Soon, someone comes along and asks Linda if they can have some of the God's Love in her hands. She replies, "Well, it's easy enough for you to go get your own," and she sends them away. Just as Linda was noticing that the blob of God's Love in her hands seemed smaller, along came someone else asking for some of the God's Love. "What? This love? I'm actually saving it for a special occasion. I'm sure you can find someone around here to give you some." And she sends them away. This time, Linda notices that her blob of God's Love has gotten even smaller. She starts to worry and decides to lock it away in a box for safekeeping. Soon, a third person comes along, saying they heard that Linda had some God's Love and wondering if they could have some. Linda says, "Sorry, I only have a little bit. Not enough, really, to share with anyone else." Once the person leaves, she races over to her box and finds it empty.

Distraught, Linda drops to her knees and asks God to forgive her. God does and gives Linda another big blob of God's Love. This time, Linda shared the God's Love with all who asked and discovered that each time she shared it, the blob got bigger and bigger instead of smaller. Soon, Linda was running through the streets, sharing God's Love with everyone she encountered and God's Love was everywhere.

There has been a lot of talk over the past several years about declining church attendance. Whether it's those who don't do church, those who are done with church or those who are just too busy for church, the fact remains that attendance across all Christian denominations has dropped by one-third over the past 20 years. In the wake of this decline, some churches have reached the point of folding or merging with another congregation in order to stay afloat. And yet, there are congregations that are vibrant and healthy and going strong; in other words, thriving.

Church leaders around the country have been looking at why some churches thrive and others struggle and fail. There's been a misconception that it's the big, wealthy churches that are thriving and the small churches are the ones struggling. That's just not the case. There have been churches comparable in size to Trinity in parts of our synod that have folded or merged, yet there's a 25-member congregation down in St. Paul that has served & ministered to thousands of people through its community programs and they are definitely thriving.

So, what are the characteristics of a thriving church? What they've found is that in thriving churches, the majority of their ministry happens outside of the church walls. The community knows who they are as a church and what they stand for. The majority of the congregation is involved in the mission of the church, rather than just a few. The congregation actively seeks people who need the support of the congregation instead of seeking people who will support the congregation. They passionately share the love of God with everyone. They regularly ask themselves, "How can we help the world today?" and they change as the needs of ministry change. They are outward focused.

All along the rest of the church scale are congregations in various stages of struggle. The one thing they have in common is that they are inward focused, with the majority of their ministry resources and programs aimed inside of the church for the benefit of members. Here are some of the other characteristics: Traditions are bathed in a golden glow. There are more social events than ministry events. There is an increase in finger pointing among the members. Members and visitors are valued based on what support, financial or otherwise, they give to the church. Little regard is given to those on the fringes of the congregation and no one really cares if those people leave because what did they contribute anyway? Compassion, hospitality, and sanctuary are reserved for those who have "earned" it. Not that long ago, a member of this congregation made a comment to me that cemented my determination to go to seminary because their comment embodied everything that the Gospel is not. Speaking of people in need, they said, "Unless I see them here on Sunday mornings, I have no interest in doing anything to help them."

I bring this up because today's Gospel reading is the Little Commission, which is a predecessor of the Great Commission, which was last week's Gospel reading. Together, they are a blueprint for the church. Jesus summons his disciples and then sends them out to do the very things that have defined his ministry from the beginning. Jesus came to bless the helpless, the harassed, the outcasts, those on the fringes. He came to offer radical hospitality & welcome, sanctuary to the poor in spirit, and outrageous love. Nowhere in the entire Gospels does Jesus tell his disciples to go build a nice building and then hang out there until he gets back. He says, "Go. Go to the lost sheep. Go proclaim the Good News. Go heal the afflicted. Go do as I do." He charges the disciples & the church to offer blessings, not conditions.

50+ years ago, the focus of the church was to fill the pews. But the mission of the church has changed and congregations are struggling to define how that looks on them. We must ask ourselves what it means to be church in community. What theological commitments are at the heart of our ministry? Who are the marginalized and how do we enter into a relationship with them? Does what we believe in Christ actually matter in how we live our lives? Christ's ministry was among all the sorts of people you wouldn't find in church on a Sunday morning; it was among the outsiders, the forgotten, and those deemed "unworthy". Christianity is a 24/7 calling to serve those on the fringes, to help all in need of help, to see those not seen. Proclaim, teach, heal, offer sanctuary, and act compassionately so that all may know the peace of Christ. This is what it means to be a disciple.

Most of us, though, feel ill-equipped or even downright unwilling to do the things Jesus asks us to do. But let me tell you, the Bible is full of ill-equipped, unwilling people who accomplished amazing things. When God told Moses to go rescue his people in Egypt, Moses' response was, "Who am I, Lord? I'm just a shepherd." When God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah ran away. When Jesus returned to the disciples after the resurrection, he did not find them doing what he had instructed them to do. Instead, he found them hiding. Jesus understands our fears and doubts. He became flesh and experienced human emotions and reticence: "Let this cup pass from me." But then they all said, "Thy will be done," something we say every single week in the Lord's Prayer. Through the power of the Holy Spirit and the promise to be with us always, Christ gives us the strength we need to do the things we'd rather not do. He gives us the strength to say, "Thy will be done" with sincerity.

Christianity is a dynamic, living, breathing ministry to share the salvation that is found through Jesus Christ. How will we make disciples of all nations if we all sit back and wait for someone else to do it? How will people experience the profound depth of God's love if we hoard it? We, as the church and as individuals, have been empowered to bless the afflicted and share the outrageous love of God with all. We are empowered to be Christ's living examples. "Thy will be done." Amen.