

**In Anything Too Wonderful?**

Part 2A - June 18, 2023

**Genesis 18:1-15**

<sup>1</sup> The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup> He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. <sup>3</sup> He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup> Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on — since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." <sup>6</sup> And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." <sup>7</sup> Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. <sup>8</sup> Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

<sup>9</sup> They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." <sup>10</sup> Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. <sup>11</sup> Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" <sup>13</sup> The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' <sup>14</sup> Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." <sup>15</sup> But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

**Matthew 9:35-10:10**

<sup>35</sup> Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. <sup>36</sup> When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup> Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; <sup>38</sup> therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest”...

<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. <sup>2</sup> These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John; <sup>3</sup> Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James, son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; <sup>4</sup> Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

<sup>5</sup> These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, <sup>6</sup> but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. <sup>7</sup> As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ <sup>8</sup> Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment, give without payment. <sup>9</sup> Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, <sup>10</sup> no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food.



Today we wrestle with the question, is anything too wonderful? We pick up the story of Abraham and Sarah, now about 25 years older than last Sunday. They learn in today's scripture that the nation promised will soon get started as Sarah has a baby, at 90.

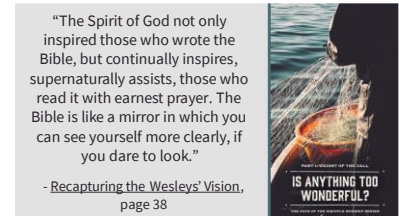
In the gospel text, the disciples are tagging along with Jesus as he teaches and offers all kinds of healings and miracles. I imagine that they lived most days with eyes wide open. And then he does it, he sends them out with instructions to do these same things. And he challenges them to go with almost nothing, trusting in God to provide. Their lives were at almost nothing when God told Abraham and Sarah to trust that a baby would be coming along soon. Talk about asking someone to trust! Even though what God was saying to Abraham and Sarah and what Jesus was telling the disciples to do must have felt nearly impossible to them at the time, looking back they must've thought, 'Is anything too wonderful for God?' Their lives would answer 'no, nothing is too wonderful for God.' As we prepare to delve into these scriptures and into where God might take each of us if we would but trust into that call, into that direction, let's pray...

Please turn with me to our gospel lesson, to Matthew 9. In verse 35 we see that Jesus is hard at it. He is teaching, and he is curing every disease and sickness. Can you imagine what that would be like, to witness that day in and day out? In verse 36 we see what was motivating Jesus. Here Jesus does something that we can struggle to do. He sees people. And he sees what is going on in their lives. Jesus sees their hardships, the burdens they bear. And because he sees them and their needs, Jesus has compassion on them. He felt compassion for the people because they were *"harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* Jesus' heart goes out to these people just like his heart goes out to you and to me. Jesus sees us in our lostness and brokenness. He sees us in our emptiness and loneliness. Jesus knows that we are under attack from both within and without. That's why he says we are all like sheep.

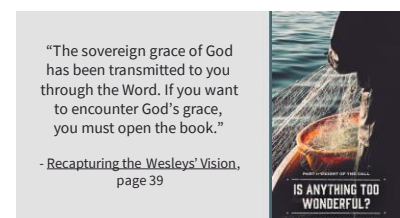
Let's make sure to notice what Jesus doesn't say or think. That is equally important to us. Jesus doesn't say, "Well, they should have known better."

He does not say, “Boy, you’d think they’d have figured it out by now” or “Why don’t they just make better choices?” Those are the things that we are tempted to say or think, aren’t they? Not Jesus. He sees them and has compassion for them. That is the expectation for a disciple too. That is Jesus’ expectation of us too!

This week in our discipleship class on Wednesday we will look at an essential practice that helps us to see as Jesus sees and leads us to be compassion and love lived out – just as Jesus was. Our focus this week is on Bible study. For John Wesley, Bible study included “hearing, reading, and meditating upon God’s word” (John Wesley’s Message Today, page 43). Early Methodism emphasized a rediscovery of the Word – that is both Jesus Christ and the Bible. For Wesley and the early Methodists, the Bible and Jesus Christ were living and dynamic. On page 38 in Recapturing the Wesleys’ Vision, author Paul Chilcote offers these words: “The Spirit of God not only inspired those who wrote the Bible, but continually inspires, supernaturally assists, those who read it with earnest prayer. The Bible is like a mirror in which you can see yourself more clearly, if you dare to look.”



Chilcote goes on to offer this encouragement concerning Bible study: “The sovereign grace of God has been transmitted to you through the Word. If you want to encounter God’s grace, you must open the book.”



Yes, to know Jesus and to know God's grace, we must invest ourselves in Bible study. To understand ourselves as created in his image, we must spend time in the word of God.

As the disciples spent time with the Word made flesh, they came to know and understand God and they began to see themselves as ones sent to minister to the world. Turning to the next verse, verse 37, here Jesus hints at this and at what is coming next for the disciples. The text tells us that Jesus said this to his disciples. Some in the larger crowd gathered around them probably heard these words too. While he was talking to the disciples in a practical sense, I think the real intended audience was God as he says, *"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."* Little did the disciples and many in the crowd that day know that they were these laborers!

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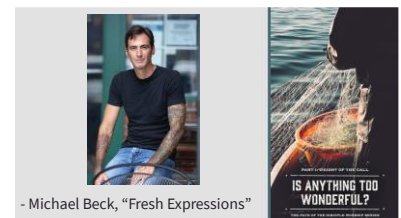
- Matthew 9:37-38



Jesus first went out and showed compassion and then he turned to the community of faith and he asks them to do the same. In chapter 10 Jesus summons the disciples and gives them authority over unclean spirits and over every disease and sickness. Then he sends them out to *"the lost sheep of Israel"* to *"proclaim the good news."* Jesus charges the disciples to *"Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons."* What the disciples have witnessed Jesus doing, they are now sent out to do. And as a means to force them to trust in God, Jesus instructs them not to take any money or any extra clothing with them.

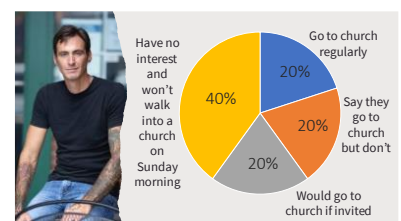
The crowd – the world – they are often very aware of their needs on a surface level. Like Chris from Shift Garage said last week, no one comes to get help with a car that doesn't have a lot of other things going on in their life. Transportation is just one of many needs. It is what connects them to Shift. In Jesus' day those that came to him were lost and hungry sheep. They were looking for someone who could feed both their physical and spiritual hunger. We too will encounter many who are in just such a place if we are willing to see and if we are willing to have compassion on them.

This past week at Annual Conference the keynote speaker was Michael Beck. He is a pastor from a small Methodist church in Florida. His key focus was “fresh expressions of faith.” In a nutshell the focus was all about taking the church outside the walls of the church. Now, don't get me wrong. He did share that he “loved his bathrobe and stole and that he loved crafting and delivering a great message on Sunday mornings.” He was very much a both/and pastor. Michael shared that we have to have worship on a Sunday that meets people's spiritual needs, but we also need to get out there to where the people are at so that we can meet those other needs too. This was very much Jesus' model. On the Sabbath he was almost always found in the synagogue, preaching the word. But the rest of the week Jesus was out there in the world, outside the walls of the church, meeting people and discovering their needs as they shared life together.



- Michael Beck, “Fresh Expressions”

To build his case for being a church outside the walls, Beck shared these statistics with us: 20% of all Americans go to church regularly, 20% say they go to church but don't, 20% say they would go if they were invited, and 40% have no interest in church and won't walk into a church on a Sunday morning, no matter what.



For the past 100 years, the church model has been to offer Sunday morning worship, to pray for new folks, and then to wait for them to come to us. More recently some “attractional models” have been tried. This model is easy and friendly and welcoming. Lots of bells and whistles, lights and loud music. It tends to be big, yes, but is often lacking in relationships and in depth.

While quality Sunday morning worship is essential to the continued growth and life of Christianity, Beck invited us to consider adding another model to our standard approach. He invited us to consider being churches and Christians who were engaged and incarnational. Michael encouraged us to be out there in the world and to be as Jesus was in the world. The incarnational aspect is going where the people are and staying there. It is cultivating church where they are and where they are doing life. A few examples of where he and his church were practicing engaged and incarnational ministry were “Burritos and Bibles,” “Dog Park Church,” “Tattoo Parlor Church,” and “Dinner Church.”



Each of these fresh expressions of faith were simple and relatively low- or no cost. Each ministry was about building relationships and making connections with people. “Church” began rather simply. Someone would share one of their favorite Jesus stories and then ask what that would look like today. Discussion would be had and questions would be asked. Faith would be made known. Soon the people would see this time as their time with God; they would see the burrito place or dog park or wherever as their church. From my time at Rapid City First, this was very much true for the AA and NA groups that met there each week. First UMC was their church.

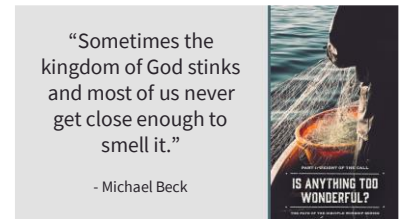
As community is formed, someone would suggest that an offering was taken, prayers would be added, and communion would come to be a central part of the practice of each new community of faith. Community is at the heart of all “churches” – whatever form they take. Community, by its very nature, is about building relationships. It is about belonging and serving. It is about hospitality that puts others before self. And it is about setting aside personal preferences in favor of seeing the other and seeing the world through their eyes. One quick example of this before we turn back to the gospel lesson.

As you can imagine, some folks might not see “Tattoo Parlor Church” as a real church. Michael shared the story of Miss Sandra. She was the 70-something chair of the administrative board at the church he serves in Wildwood, Florida. One Sunday, she told him that she just didn’t get how ministry in a tattoo parlor could be church. So he invited her to come along just once. Miss Sandra did. She showed up and found a group of people sitting in a circle on the floor having an in-depth Jesus conversation. After the gathering she shared that she felt the Spirit’s presence in that place. She started coming each week. Now, here’s where the story gets good.

One week a regular was missing. They found him afterward sitting on a park bench nearby. His foot had become badly infected, and he was almost immobile. Michael took one look at the foot, from a distance, and was repelled by the smell. Miss Sandra knelt right there beside him and examined his foot. She was a retired nurse. She quickly barked out what she needed, and someone went to the local drug store. Once she had her needed supplies she lovingly tended to the man’s foot. She knelt and cared for the foot that Michael didn’t want to get within 10 feet of.



He shared that he was deeply humbled by the incarnational presence of Jesus that Miss Sandra had become to this man. He then shared this honest truth: “Sometimes the kingdom of God stinks and most of us never get close enough to smell it.”



Miss Sandra did. Jesus did again and again as he ministered to the needs that he saw in the people that were like lost sheep. Jesus got close enough to smell the needs that were present. We too are called to get this close. When we do, my friends, we too will experience the wonderful things that God has for those who walk obediently and faithfully in discipleship.



Jesus sent the 12 out to experience the wonderful encounters found when one seeks to be the incarnation of Jesus in the world. He sent them out to pray and to be the answer to

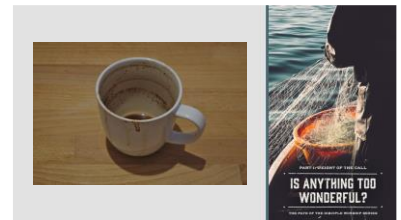
prayers. He sent them out with power too. Jesus sends us out as he sent the disciples out. He sends us out to have compassion for the world. Jesus sends us out together, to be the community of faith in the world. And he calls us to do incredible and wonderful things. And he equips us to minister in his name. We are gifted and we have resources. We have experience in our faith. We have the Holy Spirit's presence. We are invited to be a part of the wonderful work of God in the world.

Now, my friends, sometimes ministry can get a little stinky, right? It is not always easy. To illustrate this I would like to convey part of Bishop Plambeck's message at the ordination service. She was preaching on the call of God on our lives. At her first appointment she was the associate pastor at a downtown church.

There was a veteran's center near to the church. The lead pastor was a vet, as was she, and they often would go down to spend time ministering to those present at the center. Soon she befriended a man named Dale. It began with buying him lunch. Then, after a while, she would take him to the store to buy groceries. One Sunday he showed up in church. Sat in the very back row.

Slowly but surely he moved up a row each week that he was there. Then one Sunday they celebrated holy communion. The open table invitation drew Dale to come forward. Bishop Plambeck shared that when he received communion, she could see something happened. The Holy Spirit washed over Dale. After church he wanted to share his experience. Dale briefly shared that Jesus had become a part of his life again in that moment. And then he invited her to come to his house for coffee so that he could tell her all about it. She accepted and arrived there the next afternoon.

Dale lived in the attic apartment of a single-family home that now had five units. He was waiting on the sidewalk and led the way up the narrow back staircase to his apartment. It was dark but she could still see the cigarette stains thick on the walls. He offered her a cup of coffee. She watched as he went into the bathroom and poured a cup of coffee out of the Mr. Coffee that sat on the floor between the toilet and the tub. She received the cup that looked like it had several uses before it found its way to her. Dale then brought her a canolli to have along with the coffee. As she stared at her surroundings and at what was placed before her, she prayed that this offering from Dale would become for her what the bread and cup had become for Dale just the day before. Through humble surrender God became present in that place.





To be reminded just how wonderful God can be, let us return to the story of Abraham and Sarah. In the next chapter of Genesis, the two geriatrics end up in the maternity ward.

Sarah has a baby, and they name him Isaac, which means “he laughs.” Through this name they were inviting others to laugh with them and to rejoice over this wonderful thing that God had done.

Now, even though we are not called to literally have babies, we are called to give birth. As individuals and as a church we are called to birth ministries and relationships that give life, that give joy, that bring hope to others. Like the disciples and like Abraham and Sarah, we are given a calling that is both a blessing and a burden. Like Miss Sandra, we might find ourselves kneeling to care for an infected, stinky foot. Like Bishop Plambeck, we might find ourselves face to face with a dirty cup of coffee and a questionable canolli. Ministering to a world in need is not always easy or comfortable.

Through the birth of something new and through the pain of labor, Abraham and Sarah clung to the promise found in the question: Is anything too wonderful for God? That promise carried them through and it will carry us through. As we step out in faith, seeking to be the incarnation of Christ in the world, we too will find the same answer to the question, is anything too wonderful for God? May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. How is God stirring your heart? Where at work or in your social circles might God be calling you to minister to others?
- 2) *Pray*. When have you been blessed to be a part of something wonderful that God did in the world? Give thanks for this encounter with the divine.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 10:16-23. How are these words both challenging and encouraging as you think about ministering to the world?