

Mission Meditations by Nancy J. Cobb

Matthew 13:31-35

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”

There is a children’s song called “Oats, Peas, Beans and Barley Grow.” The song tells how the farmer plants the seed in the soil, nurtures the seed and watches it grow into strong healthy plants. The end of the refrain goes “nor you nor I nor anyone knows how oats, peas, beans and barley grow.”

Do you imagine when Jesus began teaching and spreading the gospel that he knew that the good news would spread throughout all the world? I don’t know. What I do know is that Jesus began with a handful of common men, the disciples. In Jesus, these disciples and the other followers of Jesus found a gospel of unconditional love and unmerited grace. Jesus began preaching to a small gathering of people, but his word – the word of God – changed the world.

The words spoken by Jesus Christ began as a small seed, a small nugget of truth, which blossomed into a religion that changed the world. We have the same opportunity today – to take a small word of encouragement, plant it with someone who isn’t sure of who they are or even aware that God exists and loves them. We can nurture that seed and watch to see how God brings that seed of encouragement to full bloom. With God, even something small can grow into something larger than ourselves, something that can change lives and something that can change the world.

John 20:21-22

“So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when he had said this, He breathed on them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

What does it mean to be sent? When I was in high school, my girlfriend Jana and I were asked to go to the shop class and ask the instructor for a “long stand” which we did. We said that our music teacher had sent us to his class to get a long stand . . . so we stood there and waited and waited and waited. About the third time we asked the instructor for the long stand – we finally got it! We had been sent, we thought, on a mission, to get this special stand. We had been tricked!

Jesus was given a mission by God - to come into the world, to become human with human thoughts and feelings, to show us, in a way we could understand, what God is like. God the Father sent his Son into the world to be our example of what God’s unconditional love looks like.

Jesus, on the day he rose from the dead, came to his disciples, those he loved and had lived with and worked with, and said Peace be to you – as I have been sent by my Father, so I, as your parent, encourager, and nurturer am sending you forth into the world. But I am not sending you out alone and Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into their being. Jesus gave them a helper to carry out the commission they had been given.

Jana, my girlfriend had been asked to go by herself to get the long stand, but I thought surely she would need help to carry that “long stand” back to the music room – so I went. Jesus makes sure that when we are sent into the world to do his work – we are not sent alone. Peace be with you as you do the work of the Father.

Mark 11:15-17

“Then they ‘came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves; and He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple. And He began to teach and say to them, “Is it not written, My House shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?” But you have made it a robbers’ den.”

I worked as a Chaplain at a large hospital in the medical center. Being a chaplain we encountered people of all different faiths and religious backgrounds. Because of the diversity of the people coming to the hospitals, we needed to be flexible and available to minister to all the people. There is definitely one common denominator among people – when you are sick and dying, it doesn’t matter what your religious background is – you want someone who helps you to encounter the holy – in life and in death.

In the chapel at the hospital, areas were created where different faiths could have a quiet space in which they could worship God. Yes, I am a Christian, but it was always comforting to see a Muslim in prayer on their prayer rug in the corner of the chapel.

Jesus said it himself, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?” In Isaiah 56: 7, Isaiah announces the word of God that “even those I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar: for my house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.” Godly non-Jews were allowed a place to worship God in the temple.

There is room in God’s house for everyone. If God didn’t turn them away from prayer in his house, where does our authority come to turn others away from God?

Matthew 25:34-40

“Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundations of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me; then the righteous will answer Him, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or in prison, and come to You? The King will answer and say to them, truly I say to you, to the extent you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.”

The first mission trip I ever went on was to Corozal, Belize. Our church was involved in building an eye clinic and was sending several teams over a period of years to Corozal. I was on one of the first work teams and we were actually building the eye clinic: laying rebar and cementing in 25 lb. concrete blocks to make the walls. It was hard work; but the load was made easier because we were working along side Belizeans. We shared everything during those weeks: joys, concerns, prayers, and praises. One of the Belizeans was named Jonathan and he was not very big in stature and was deaf and mute. Jonathan was one of the hardest working men on the crew. Every time you looked around, Jonathan was right there; he was bringing us food and water, he was handing us tools, he always seemed to be there when we needed something.

One day one of our team members from the church, Nick, fell off a ladder and badly twisted his ankle. We were away from our camp and had no transportation available to transport Nick back to the manse where we were staying. Jonathan, without hesitation, picked up Nick and carried him on his back to our camp. Here was Jonathan, deaf and mute and small in stature and quite literally “the least of these”, showing Jesus’ love and compassion for a stranger.

At the closing of our mission trip, our church group gathered for its final worship service. Our leader brought us to tears as we remembered Jonathan. As the sun set that last night, our mission leader pointed out to us that in Jonathan we had seen and experienced Christ in the flesh. We had gone to Belize expecting to build an eye clinic; what we didn’t anticipate was seeing Christ in the face of Jonathan and being ministered to in a powerful way by “one of the least of these”. Who, in this mission experience, gave the most and who received the most?

Luke 15:1-7

Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” So He told them this parable, saying, “What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me for I have found my sheep which was lost!’ I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

Complacency – is that what Luke might have been talking about in this scripture passage? After all, out of this flock of one hundred sheep, ninety-nine were just fine. Why should I expend my energy to go searching for the one sheep that is lost? That one sheep apparently wasn’t very smart or probably wouldn’t really amount to very much any way. I’m guessing that is the attitude that the Pharisees and the scribes might have taken - of course they wouldn’t have even been out in the field searching in the first place! It’s easy to take care of those that look like us, those that act like us – those ninety-nine sheep that had stayed together and were acting like they were supposed to act. It takes more time and energy to go looking for that one lost sheep that isn’t like us.

Jesus goes looking for those that are on the margins – those that are lost. He ate with tax collectors and sinners because they were lost. When no one else will take the time to search for us – Jesus will. And Jesus calls us to look for those around us that are lost and offer a word of encouragement, help with food, clothing, shelter, employment. We are called to offer them Jesus. When we do that, there is much rejoicing! Are you satisfied with the ninety-nine sheep in your flock or will you partner with Jesus and look for the one that needs to be found? Keep your eyes open – that “one” could be sitting next to you at Luby’s or Starbucks or Los Tios!