

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Now of all the passages we could have chosen for our Assembly theme of the Missional River, this one is a little odd. If we're talking about mission, wouldn't Matthew's Great Commission text be a better choice? "Making disciples" appeals to our American values of productivity and achievement. After all, we can measure the number of members and dollars we took in last year to judge how we did.

Now, in a new mission start, we knock on lots of doors to find disciples to join us. But after our congregation has been organized a while, we get used to having "enough" people so we tend to stop trying so hard. After all, we're not Mormon or Baptist. So the Great Commission for most of us ends up being about taking whoever comes to us on Sunday morning and making disciples out of them.

Now, Lutherans used to be pretty good at having kids, and the culture used to support us as Christians in so many ways. But things have changed. Our birth rates are down, there are now soccer games on Sunday mornings, and church has gotten a bum rap for all kinds of reasons. Those young people we thought we had made into good disciples have walked out our doors and aren't returning. And many of us find our pews sparsely filled and our budgets barely able to support our pastor and keep our buildings repaired. So while that Matthew 28 has served us well in the past, it doesn't seem to connect like it used to.

So what about the Great Commandment text from John's gospel, where Jesus tells his disciples to love one another? This is the "they will know we are Christians by our love" command that Lutherans like so much, because we don't have to actually say anything about Jesus or our faith. We can care for those in our midst who are sick and in need, we can feed the hungry, raise money for this charity and that. We can participate in God's Work, our Hands Sunday.

It makes us feel good to serve others, especially when we are helping those whom we see as "less fortunate" than ourselves. But we find that sometimes our helping hurts. If we're not careful, we can enable a culture of neediness, with us becoming "the saviors" of the world rather than leaving that to Jesus.

So now we come to today's Gospel, where Jesus gives us a different kind of command; a more ambiguous and uncomfortable one for us.

This story begins with Jesus sending out, not the 12 "professionals", but 70 others. 70 ordinary folks who'd had some contact with Jesus – your average pew sitters who may never have served on Church Council or led a Bible study. Jesus says – "go out there among people who aren't like you!" Now he sends them out in pairs, so no one feels alone, AND they're just the advance scouts – Jesus is also planning to show up there!

And Jesus tells them that the harvest is plentiful – there are a bumper crop of people "out there." But then Jesus tells them that they can't bring anything with them. Carry no wallet, no hammer,

no canned goods, no Life Straws. You're not going out to "help those people" whom you meet, at least not when you first get there. And you're not there to convert them. In fact, Jesus says, you're going to be on the receiving end of their hospitality.

Jesus is sending them into communities, but this isn't your standard "drive by" evangelism. You don't knock on the door, drop off a church newsletter and go on to the next house. Jesus says – go into whatever place you're invited in, and stay a while – hang out and get to know people. Share my peace with them – and if they accept it, great, if not, that's ok. But stay anyway!

Eat and drink whatever they do, even if it's not something you're used to. If they're working, work alongside them. Along the way, if you find some sick people, cure them. If you find anyone open to hearing it, you can begin to share some ways that you have seen God at work.

But your main focus is accepting hospitality, listening, building relationships, and paying attention to what God is already doing in and with your hosts and how you might join in.

That sounds pretty loosey goosey, doesn't it? How will we know when we've "achieved" what God wants us to achieve?

Well, the truth is that we are in the midst of massive changes in our world and in the church. And our past "measures of success" don't seem to tell the whole story, because even if we are fortunate enough to be in a congregation that is growing numerically, overall, what's really growing in North America, are the number of people who claim no religious affiliation.

That's the harvest Jesus is talking about! But we don't yet understand what the new ways to reach these folks might be or how we might measure our effectiveness in doing so. It's a bewildering time to live in – between what was and what will be.

It's a lot like what happened to God's people after they were set free from bondage in Egypt. They didn't go straight to a new life. They ended up wandering in the wilderness for a time. Well, the Church is wilderness wandering too, between what was, the ways of being church that used to work, and what will be – the new ways of being church God is calling us into.

Now, personally, I'm not a fan of wandering! I like to go from point a to b in the most direct way possible. When I look at the map of God's people wandering in the Sinai –I could have charted a much more efficient course. But their wandering was really about the journey more than the destination.

Think about what happened to God's people as they wandered – God provided for them at every turn – not always what they wanted, but what they needed. God led them step by step, even if the path was not direct. They learned to trust God, even in the midst of their grumbling. And God formed them as God's missional people to be a blessing to others.

We in the Southwestern Texas Synod are doing our own wilderness wandering. Things aren't the same as they used to be. We've lost congregations. We've lost synod staff and congregational members. A lot of what we used to do isn't working any more, but it's not exactly clear yet as to

what the new will be like. So we're on a journey together. And we're calling that journey the **missional river**.

We have so many wonderful rivers all over Texas. And, if you've ever been on a river, you know that it's not a straight ride. There are twists and turns, and you can't see too far ahead. There are some places and times when the river moves quickly, and others where it seems to not move at all. There are parts of the river that are all dried up, but there's always the possibility that the water will flow.

That's the missional river that God is calling us to stick a toe in, or maybe jump into.

Today's gospel from Luke fits well with this missional river, because Jesus invites us to go on a journey, a journey where we're not in control – but God is. It's a journey where we don't know the answers, but we're going to learn along the way. It's a journey where we are called out of our churches and into our neighborhoods, to connect with our neighbors and with what God is already up to out there. It's a journey where God promises to be with us, to lead us, to provide for us, and to re-form us as God's missional people for the 21st century.

And in all sorts of ways across our synod, people and congregations are jumping into the river. They are getting out of their churches and beginning to meet their neighbors and to see God at work. 11 congregations from 5 conferences are in a process of listening to God through Scripture, one another and their neighborhood. 5 congregations are participating in a community based advocacy pilot where they are learning how to join in with what God is up to in their contexts.

Around the synod, there are congregations and conferences meeting their neighbors in pubs and coffee houses, in German bakeries and out on the land. People are starting community gardens and doing prayer walks around their neighborhoods. They're joining community associations and inviting neighbors over for dinner, and they're finding God at work in some amazing ways!

Because God isn't trapped inside our churches – God is loose in the world! And God invites us out into the world to find out what God's already up to and how we might join in.

Tonight you will have an opportunity to put a toe in the river by going out on a mission crawl. There are some specific places you could go, but really any place you go can be a mission crawl when you are attentive to the Spirit of God at work in your midst.

God is loose in our towns and neighborhoods. God is doing a new thing all around us. I invite you to join us on the journey, ears, hands and hearts open to receive and share God's grace and mercy. What are you waiting for? Jump in!