

## Essential Choices: Sent over Stuck

Acts 1:8; 8:1,4; and more through Acts

Shakespeare, who was a master at captivating audiences, wrote:  
"The tongues of dying men enforce attention . . ."

After a lifetime of talk, texts, tweets, chatter, gossip, and jokes, some of which *could* be memorable, people still have a particular fascination with final words. As Shakespeare understood, they catch our attention.

We are intrigued by parting words like those of Julius Caesar, "You, too, Brutus?"

Or Marco Polo, the Italian merchant and explorer and writer who travelled across Asia in the 13th century.

"I have not told half of what I saw."

Or Johann Sebastian Bach,

the German composer in the early 18th century, who said:

"Don't cry for me, for I go where music is born."

Or unremarkable comments like

Moe Berg, an American baseball catcher,

"How did the Mets do today?"

Or ironic ones, like General John Sedgwick at the Battle of Spotsylvania during the Civil War, who said, just before being killed by enemy fire,

"They couldn't hit an *elephant* at this distance!"

Or heart-wrenching ones like

Todd Beamer, passenger on United Flight 93, September 11, 2001.

"Are you guys ready? Let's roll."

The last words of Jesus had *cosmic* significance.

On the cross, just before he died, Jesus said, "It is finished!"

His great work of redemption was finished and complete;

the way was open for all the world to be saved.

Unlike *anyone* else, Jesus had a second set of last words, 40 days later, before he ascended to heaven.

These words, too, have enduring meaning, so much so

that they are recorded in all four gospels and again in Acts, five times in all.

The most familiar, in Matthew 28:18-20, we call the Great Commission:

All authority in heaven and earth has been handed over to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of

the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Mark reports Jesus' final words this way, Mark 16:15-18:

Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.

Luke gives this account in Luke 24:45-49:

Then [Jesus] opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

John's report is in chapter 20, verses 21-23:

"As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Luke repeats Jesus' final words at the beginning of *Acts*, chapter 1, verse 8:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

This second set of Jesus' last words—  
repeated these five times for maximum impact—  
are his "marching orders" for a mission in which we are all enlisted!

The followers of Jesus are to go,  
to move among all the peoples of the world,  
and make lifelong disciples,

baptizing all who trust in Jesus  
and teaching them to obey Jesus in all things.  
As we do this, in the power of the Holy Spirit,  
people will come to saving faith in Jesus,  
into the kinship and partnership of the Church,  
and to full maturity in Christ.

**For this purpose, we are all “sent.”**

And here is the encouragement in this *one* word:  
As the Holy Spirit gives us *love* for people,  
opens our eyes to see who we can *relate* to,  
and give us the courage to *go* to them—  
to listen, to care, and to tell what know about Jesus—  
**any** of us, **anywhere**, can help someone take **another step** toward Jesus.

The trouble is, we are too often “**stuck**” *in place*—immobile and silent.

The message series this summer is about twelve essential choices  
as we observe them in the book of *Acts*.

The choice in focus this morning is “**Sent over Stuck.**”

The word “apostle” means “sent.”

That was the primary mission of the twelve—  
to be “sent” into all the world to tell the good news about Jesus.

There was no way the apostles could have misunderstood this assignment.  
Yet as we read through the first seven chapters of *Acts*,  
even after they were baptized by the Holy Spirit,  
the apostles and early Christians were “stuck” in Jerusalem . . .  
until *persecution* drove them out.  
To their credit, as they scattered,  
they began to tell about Jesus in other places—Acts 8, verses 1 and 4:

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in  
Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea  
and Samaria. . . Those who had been scattered preached the word  
wherever they went.

As we read about what happened after this,  
person by person, incident by incident, through the Book of *Acts*  
we can learn what it means for us, too, to be sent.

In these accounts, it is clear that **anyone** who follows Jesus is “sent” to make disciples.

The disciples Peter and Andrew, James and John, were ordinary working men and Jesus called them to *a new life work*:

“Come, follow me and I will send you out to fish for people.” Mark 1:17

Later, among all his disciples, Jesus choose twelve to be apostles:

He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.

As the story goes on, Jesus sent out 72 disciples, two by two.

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.

In Acts, we see the *apostles* Peter and Paul making disciples.

We see Stephen, named as a *deacon*, preaching and doing great wonders and signs among the people; and Philip, identified as a *deacon* and *evangelist*, telling about Jesus. We also read about Ananias, identified only as a *disciple*, sent as the first emissary to the newly converted Saul in Acts 9:10-12 (ESV)

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.”

As the Spirit moves in the early church, we see apostles, deacons, evangelists, and *disciples*—all sent to tell about Jesus and make more disciples.

Jesus’ last words encompass all of us, whatever our role in the Church. We may not think of ourselves as apostles or evangelists or deacons, but **anyone** can make an *apostolic choice*—to be sent instead of stuck.

And the response Jesus is looking for is the same as that of Ananias:

Here I am, Lord. (Acts 9:10)

Once we make ourselves available, then what?

Without question, the last words of Jesus involve movement.  
 Whether *explicit* in the word “go”  
 or *implicit* in the word “sent”  
 or *implied* by the destinations that are named,  
 we are not to be immobile; we are to move toward people—  
 whether intentionally, with a plan, or spontaneously, as opportunities come.

Listen again to the key phrases in Jesus’ last words as they are reported:  
 In Matthew, the destination is “to all nations.”  
 Mark uses the phrases, “into all the world” and “to all creation.”  
 Luke writes: “to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem.”  
 In Acts, Luke expands the destination with this strategic sequence:

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the  
 ends of the earth.

*What do we do next? We go—**anywhere!***

We start with people nearby,  
 because we relate most readily and easily with people like ourselves.

For the early church that was Jerusalem.  
 The equivalent for us is Millersville, Washington Boro, Columbia,  
 East Petersburg, Lancaster, Elizabethtown, and Philadelphia—  
 to family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, classmates, and students.

The easiest people to reach are just like us,  
 living right where we are—in our Jerusalem.

At some point, the Holy Spirit may open the way for us to engage  
 with people who are further away—in *distance* or *background* or *culture*—  
 people who are somewhat, but not entirely, like us.

We see this happening in *Acts*.  
 The evangelist Philip preached in nearby Samaria.  
 Along a desert road, to the south of Jerusalem, he talked with an Ethiopian.  
 Peter was sent, 36 miles away,  
 from Joppa to Caesarea to talk with Cornelius, a Roman soldier.  
 Barnabas was sent, 300 miles away, to Antioch

to be pastor of a bicultural church of Jews and Gentiles—  
in all of these nearby places,  
they were telling people, who were somewhat different, about Jesus.

Just this week Connie had deep conversation with an Amish friend,  
who lives just over a mile away, but is part of a different *culture*.  
Connie's friend shared a personal struggle.  
Connie listened, empathized, and expressed care—  
which may open the way, at another time,  
for Connie to talk about the insights and strength she's found in Jesus.

The Spirit may call some of us, in this progression of destinations,  
to the ends of the earth.

As we know Dwight and Carol's story, this is the first summer in 20 years  
that they have not traveled to Zambia to serve there.  
For Dwight and Carol this is going to all nations.  
For Gilbert Mweetwa, who spoke to us last week in our zoom worship,  
this same nation, Zambia, is his Jerusalem.

Geography is not the issue. We can tell about Jesus **anywhere**.  
We begin where we are, with people we know best;  
we may go to people of different backgrounds and cultures;  
and as the Spirit directs, we may be called to go far away.

To pull this together, **anyone** is called to tell about Jesus.  
We do this **anywhere**.  
And our aim is to help them take **another step** toward Jesus.

The overall objective of Jesus' last words to make lifelong disciples,  
baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything he commanded.  
Our part, by our day-to-day life and witness,  
is to help people take **another step** toward Jesus.

A man by the name of James Engel studied the dynamics of conversion  
and developed a numerical scale, now named after him, the Engel Scale.  
Using 21 numbers—from minus 10, through zero, to plus 10—  
Engel quantified the progression from no knowledge of God,  
step by step, to conversation,  
and all the way to full maturity as a follower of Jesus.  
A person at minus 10 would know nothing about God;  
at zero, he or she would trust Jesus as Savior;  
and at plus 10 the person would come to full maturity in Christ.

I used to think that our *sole* aim in witnessing was to assist people to cross the line of faith, on the Engel scale, at zero, the moment of conversation.

I *now* see—as the Great Commission in Matthew 28 makes plain by the reference to baptism and to obeying all of Jesus’ commands—that our witness can help someone take any step from *exposure* to *consideration* to *conviction* to *conversion*, to *baptism* to *growth* to *maturity*. Anything we say or do, anywhere along that continuum, can help to make a lifelong disciple for Jesus.

Among *all* of us who participate in making a disciple, *someone* will have the privilege of coaching a person at conversion. *Many* of us will contribute to the incremental steps in the process, starting wherever they are in the minus numbers, all the way to 10 on the scale, a mature disciple of Jesus.

In the children’s talk last week Stephanie and Zeke were fulfilling the great commission. Their talk was aimed at our children, who are growing up in families of faith, and would already be near or beyond zero on the Engel Scale. Whether any of our children responded in faith or were solidified in their understanding of the Gospel, that clear presentation of the Good News *was* disciple-making!

As followers of Jesus, the only qualification to be a worker in the harvest is not to be **stuck** when Jesus asks us, like he did Isaiah:

“Whom shall I **send**, and who will go for us?”

The answer Jesus is waiting for, like that of Isaiah and the disciple Ananias, is:

**“Here I am! Send me.”**

As the Holy Spirit gives us *love* for people, opens our eyes to see who we can *relate* to, and give us the courage to *go* to them—to listen, to care, and to tell what know about Jesus—**any** of us, **anywhere**, can help someone take **another step** toward Jesus.

Warren L. Hoffman  
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Millersville BIC Church