

ONE MINISTRY, MANY SETTINGS: AT HOME (1st in a series of 4)

I USED to say in my preaching and teaching that we have MANY ministries as DISCIPLES of Jesus Christ, but that's WRONG! We have only ONE ministry, but it's a ministry that LIVED out in MANY settings. And for this SERMON series, I've come up with 4 BASIC settings that I'd like to talk about over the next 4 Sundays: our ministry at HOME, our ministry in the WORKPLACE, our ministry in the WIDER community, AND our ministry or ministries at CHURCH. And our 3 Scripture Lessons this MORNING offer us a GLIMPSE at WHAT that ministry is all ABOUT!

And it BEGINS with BAPTISM! AT His BAPTISM, Jesus receives a very PRECIOUS gift, a gift that we ALL yearn for and STRIVE after for most of our lives: the gift of IDENTITY. I mean, ALL of a sudden, as Jesus EMERGES from the water, God's Holy Spirit enables Him to know WHO He IS and WHAT His life will be ABOUT! ALL of a sudden, Jesus UNDERSTANDS that HE is the fulfillment of Isaiah's PROPHECY, that HE is God's MESSIAH, God's CHOSEN One, that He is God's beloved SON! And so, His life's WORK, His life's MISSION, is OUTLINED in Isaiah, chapter 42. And WHAT a GIFT it IS to know WHO you are and WHAT YOUR life is to be ABOUT!

Well friends, it's LONG been the conviction of the CHURCH -- in fact, since the very BEGINNING of the church, since Peter's SPEECH in ACTS, chapter 10 -- that WE are given the SAME gift at OUR baptism! At OUR baptism, God says to EACH of us WHAT God says to JESUS at HIS baptism: *YOU are my BELOVED, my CHOSEN! And I LOVE you!*" And isn't THAT the message that WE want to give ANYONE being baptized on ANY given Sunday? We're saying to EACH of them: *YOU are LOVED! YOU are God's beloved SON or DAUGHTER! If you're an INFANT, you haven't even done anything to DESERVE it yet. ALL you do is MESS your diapers and WAKE up your parents in the middle of the NIGHT, but you're LOVED -- and NOT just by US, but by GOD!* Well, IF we are God's BELOVED, God's CHOSEN, then we TOO have a MINISTRY! And it's the SAME divine WORK that's outlined in Isaiah 42. LIKE Jesus, WE are to establish JUSTICE! WE are to be a LIGHT to the nations! WE are to open eyes that are BLIND and release EVERY kind of CAPTIVE! WHY? Because that's GOD'S work! That's what GOD does! And IF WE are GOD'S children, then GOD'S work is OUR work! It's our MINISTRY, whether we are at HOME or in the workplace, in the wider community and world, or at CHURCH. And we TAKE our lead from JESUS. In OTHER words, WE are called to DO and SAY what JESUS would DO and SAY if HE were here in the flesh. WE are called to be HIS hands and HIS voice -- His BODY -- in OUR world today!

But WHAT does that MEAN for BUSY, stressed out 21st Century AMERICANS? HOW do we DO that? WHAT does that SAY about HOW we are to LIVE and SPEAK and ACT in the various SETTINGS of our lives? Well, AS I was preparing this SERMON, I remembered a SONG by Kathy Mattea, called *SEEDS*. And it's a SONG that I think offers us a SIMPLE, helpful, UNIQUE perspective. LISTEN:

SONG: SEEDS by Kathy Mattea (from *Lonesome Standard Time*)

1. Sometimes I stop on my way home and watch the children play,
And I wonder if they wonder what they'll be someday.
Some will dream a big dream and make it all come true,
While others go on dreaming of things they'll never do.

**Chorus: We're all just seeds in God's hands. We start the same, but where we land
Is sometimes fertile soil and sometimes sand. We're all just seeds in God's hands.**

2. I saw a friend the other day I hardly recognized.
 He'd done a lot of living since I'd last looked in his eyes.
 He told his tale of how he'd failed, the lessons he'd been taught,
 But he offered no excuses, and he left me with this thought: **REPEAT CHORUS**

3. And AS I'm standing at a crossroads once again,
 I'm reminded we're all the same when we begin, & IN the end..... **REPEAT CHORUS**

Friends, as I see it, OUR job as disciples of Jesus (our MINISTRY) is to be FERTILE soil, soil that enables and empowers GROWTH! SO, whether we're talking about CHILDREN or friends, COLLEAGUES at work, or people we meet at church, our fellow citizens in KEENE or the United States or the world, it's OUR job to TOUCH their lives with God's GOODNESS and love, God's compassion and peace, God's JUSTICE and freedom! It's OUR job to TOUCH their lives with the QUALITIES that have been made VISIBLE, made FLESH, in and through Jesus Christ. It's OUR job to offer OTHERS (AND ourselves) a SAFE and welcoming, stable and nourishing, PATIENT and trustworthy, FORGIVING and encouraging ENVIRONMENT in which to GROW in SPIRIT, MIND and BODY – and MOST of all, in the knowledge and love of God. Yes, friends, THAT'S the SUM and SUBSTANCE of our MINISTRY! WE are to be FERTILE, life-giving SOIL! And IF we take that call and challenge SERIOUSLY, it will affect EVERYTHING that we DO and SAY and THINK -- from the way we raise our CHILDREN to the way we welcome people into our HOME and CHURCH, from the way we CARE for the sick to the way we coach a LITTLE League team, from the way we VOTE in the voting booth to way we do our JOB at work, from the way we spend our MONEY to the way we choose WHICH legislation to support, from the way we serve our CHURCH to the way we make daily DECISIONS. Yes, it will affect EVERYTHING that we DO and SAY and THINK!

Well TODAY, our task is to consider our ministry at HOME. And whether we live ALONE or with a friend or lover; whether we still live with our parents or have we have a DOZEN children; whether we have MULTIPLE generations living under the same roof or live in a single-parent family; whether we're straight or gay, WHEN we choose to make our lives a MINISTRY, it DOES make a DIFFERENCE at HOME! In my 31 YEARS of ministry, I have entered a MULTITUDE of homes. And I can ALWAYS tell the difference when somebody is making their home-life a MINISTRY. EVEN with HOMEBOUND people living ALONE, I can tell very quickly WHAT kind of SOIL I'm IN when I enter their HOME. IS there an atmosphere of NURTURING and CARING, patience and understanding? IS this FERTILE soil in which one can GROW or blossom? OR, am I hearing CONSTANT complaining and criticizing and condemning?

And homes with CHILDREN, are the children being encouraged and complimented, LISTENED to and supported, DISCIPLINED and LIMITED and CHALLENGED? Do their parents LOVE them enough to say NO sometimes? And are there OTHER times when the parents sacrifice their OWN needs for the sake of their CHILDREN'S needs? One of my FAVORITE statements on PARENTING is called, ***I LOVED YOU ENOUGH....*** And it says: *I loved you ENOUGH to ASK where you were going, with whom, and what TIME you would be home. I loved you ENOUGH to stand over you for 2 hours while you cleaned your room, a job that would have taken ME 15 minutes. I loved you ENOUGH to let you see ANGER, disappointment, and TEARS in my eyes.... I loved you ENOUGH to let YOU assume responsibility for YOUR actions, even when the PENALTIES were so HARSH they almost broke MY heart. But MOST of all, I loved you ENOUGH to say 'NO' when I knew you would HATE me for it. THOSE were the most DIFFICULT battles of all. I'm glad I WON them because, in the END, YOU won too!* Yes, WHAT are the VALUES, spoken and unspoken, that are being LIVED out in the homes of CHILDREN, because children LEARN what they LIVE? Do the parents OFFER their children a BALANCED upbringing, so that the children's spirit, mind and body

ALL receive proper NOURISHMENT & CARE? OR, do they just automatically SKIP Church School whenever there's a CONFLICT with SOCCER or BASEBALL? Do the kids' parents COMMUNICATE with one another LOVINGLY and MUTUALLY, even about DIFFICULT topics? OR, does ONE parent always CONTROL the relationship? DO the parents make time for ROMANCE and learning new RELATIONSHIP skills? After ALL, the KEY to a family's STRENGTH, or a STEPFAMILY'S strength, is the BOND between the COUPLE. In other words, DOES this home offer FERTILE soil in which these precious, young SEEDS can GROW?

You know, what's helped ME through the years is thinking of my HOME and FAMILY as a TRAINING ground in CHRISTIAN love, in the love that St. PAUL describes in First Corinthians 13. That's the LOVE passage that we hear so often at WEDDINGS. And IN it, St. Paul says that *LOVE is patient and kind and envies NO one. Love is never BOASTFUL, nor conceited, nor RUDE; never SELFISH and not quick to take OFFENSE. Love keeps NO score of WRONGS, and does not GLOAT over other's SINS, but delights in the TRUTH.* But even though we HEAR it at WEDDINGS, this reading has NOTHING to do with MARRIED love, or FAMILY love. The Greek WORD that Paul USES here is *AGAPE*, and *agape* love is a general kind of love, a love for ALL of CREATION simply because GOD created it. SO, Paul's LOVE passage is about CHRISTIAN love, the kind of LOVE that followers of JESUS are to offer EVERYONE, even their worst ENEMIES. It's the SAME word that Jesus uses in His Sermon on the Mount, when He says, *LOVE your ENEMIES and PRAY for those who PERSECUTE you.* But if you think about it, it's DIFFICULT, even in our homes and families to LIVE by the kind of love that PAUL is describing. So to ME, how it applies to Christian MARRIAGES and FAMILIES is that THEY become our TRAINING ground for this CHRISTIAN kind of love. And IF we choose to make our homes a TRAINING ground in THIS kind of love, then our love will SPILL over and TOUCH the lives of others OUTSIDE our homes and families. For example, the WAY we DEAL with a TRAGEDY in our HOME and family can provide FERTILE soil for OTHERS to grow in THEIR faith and love. I mean, how many BLIND eyes are OPENED when people see US facing PAIN and trauma with a deep TRUST in the EASTER truth, the TRUTH that says that, even in the MIDST of dreadful CRUCIFIXIONS in our lives, God is at WORK creating NEW life, creating RESURRECTIONS! ANOTHER way to offer fertile soil for growth is the ART of FORGIVENESS. After all, REVENGE is SUCH a prevalent response in our culture these days that FORGIVENESS can be DISARMING -- and FREEING! Our HOSPITALITY is ANOTHER way to provide fertile soil for GROWTH! Between the HIGH tech, impersonal world of BUSINESS, and the trend that has MOVED us from the front PORCH to the back DECK, we LIVE in a very INHOSPITABLE culture. But our HOMES and CHURCH can be DIFFERENT! WE can OFFER hospitality and welcome, warmth and compassion, LOVE and peace that are RARE in the world AROUND us. We can offer to one and ALL the qualities of FERTILE soil, the qualities that make for GROWTH, IF we CHOOSE to!

Yes friends: OUR ministry, LIKE the ministry of JESUS, is to be FERTILE, life-giving SOIL that is conducive to GROWTH, and LIFE, for ALL the SEEDS that are IN God's hands, and what BETTER place to ACCOMPLISH this important ministry than in our HOMES and families? SO, when you LEAVE this place today, I HOPE that you will THINK about, and PRAY about, and TALK about, ALL of the ways that YOU can use YOUR home more PRODUCTIVELY to be FERTILE soil, to be a setting for EFFECTIVE and life-giving MINISTRY in the name of Jesus Christ. And come to our BRUNCH and talk about it with OTHERS, for we ALL have much to LEARN, don't we? Amen.