

We Have Work To Do

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Mark 6:1-13

“Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.”

On Wednesday evening, myself, Elliot VanHoy, our Director of Youth Ministry, and Andrew Kuhn, our former Director of Youth Ministry and now parent chaperone, returned with fourteen St. David's youth from a five-day mission trip that took place in the city of Philadelphia. This mission trip, better known as Mission Philadelphia, was a partnership with Trinity Episcopal Church in Solebury. Trinity has been doing these Mission Philly trips for twenty-eight years. We were grateful that they let us be a part of it. The youth did some urban farming and helped transform abandoned spaces in the West Philadelphia Corridor. They worked in a few locations such as St. Barnabas, Episcopal Community Services Resource Center, West Philly Peace Park, Pearl St. Orchard & Garden, Girarden Community Garden, and North Philly Peace Park. This work helps provide concentrated, substantive advances in developing safe, inviting places for underserved neighborhoods and educating the area children on the environment and healthy living. Our group worked on garden beds, built fences, weeded, and planted vegetables.

As many of you know, St. David's has a long history of local and international youth mission trips. The pandemic put a halt on the tradition of doing a mission trip for our youth every summer. So, when Elliot and I heard about the opportunity to partner with Trinity Solebury we were excited. We were excited for two reasons:

Reason number 1:

1. It was local. There is a reality that the city of Philadelphia needs groups like Mission Philadelphia. The impact of food insecurity is pervasive in Philadelphia. In a 2023 census, Philadelphia's poverty rate was 23.1% - double the national average. Nearly 250,000 residents are estimated to be food insecure, with North Philadelphia widely considered a “food desert,” an urban area in which fresh, quality, affordable food cannot be easily found. The impact of these factors is most striking when comparing life expectancy across zip codes within the city, where children born in North Philadelphia have a 20-year-shorter life expectancy than those born in the more affluent parts of the city.¹

Reason number 2:

2. The opportunity to partner with Trinity. In a world where fewer and fewer people are going to church, unbelief is on the rise. We found it extremely powerful to do

¹ <https://towerhealth.org/articles/combating-food-insecurity-north-philly>

the work of Jesus Christ together. We found it important to combine these two Episcopal churches for a common mission and common prayer.

Our group and Trinity's group of youth and adults totaled thirty-eight people. It served as a good reminder that we are part of the wider church, especially this branch of the Jesus Movement that we call the Episcopal Church.

Our gospel passage this morning from Mark is one that should empower us. At this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus has done some amazing things. He's been baptized, he has healed very sick people, he has called his disciples, he has taught people about the Kingdom of God, and two weeks ago he stopped a storm. In the first five chapters of Mark, Jesus hit his stride. Then we get to chapter six, Jesus returned to his hometown. He continued to do some of the teaching he did in the previous chapters, and how did the people of his hometown respond? It says, "And they took offense at him." Eugene Peterson's translation in *The Message* probably gets it right. Because people think they know who Jesus is, they end up asking disdainfully, "Who does he think he is?"² How does Jesus respond? He doesn't argue, he doesn't get mad, he cured a few more people and then moved on to neighboring villages to teach.

Jesus was amazed by their unbelief, presumably, these were people who knew him. What might have been a discouraging interaction for most of us, having returned home and been questioned and rejected, Jesus doubled down. In the very next verses, he called his disciples and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits. The action of calling his disciples and giving them authority to do his work was empowering for the disciples at the time and empowering for us now. Because we, very much like the disciples, are flawed, we come to church every Sunday and confess our sins, yet Jesus sends us out. Jesus has given his disciples both past and present the authority to do his work. Jesus knows that it's not easy to do his work. He knows that there will be moments when we need to shake off the dust that is on our feet and move on.

We have been empowered by the love of Christ. It is challenging to do the work of love, healing, and discipleship. Especially, in the world we live in that is full of poverty, hate, fear, and unbelief. Yet, we are not alone. Like the disciples, we are sent out together to be the body of Christ in a broken world. We follow Jesus, who journeyed this path alongside us, and his path was a difficult one, but he showed us that resurrection and new life are possible when we follow him.

A few weeks ago, the Episcopal Church met in Louisville, Kentucky for the 81st General Convention. The General Convention is the governing body of The Episcopal Church. Every three years it meets as a bicameral legislature that includes the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops, composed of deputies and bishops from each diocese. This year was an important convention because it was responsible for electing our new Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Rt. Rev. Sean Rowe.

The election of Bishop Rowe meant that Presiding Bishop Michael Curry would be concluding his nine-year term. Although I did not attend the convention, there were two very important things that both Curry and Rowe had to say about the Episcopal Church. In Bishop Curry's opening remarks at the Convention he said, "This Episcopal

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-14-2/commentary-on-mark-61-13-2>

Church is stronger, more durable, and has a future that God has decreed, and that God has figured out," he said. "Don't you worry about this church. Don't you weep and don't you moan. Just roll up your sleeves and let's get to work. That's our future." Bishop Rowe, in his address to the General Convention after he was elected said, "It's not too strong to say that we're facing an existential crisis. It's not because our church is dying, or because we've lost the belief in the salvation of God in Jesus Christ, but because the world around us has changed and continues to change. It changes all the time. And God is calling us ever more deeply into the unknown."

What I heard from both of these leaders is that we have some work to do. We as a church, as followers of Jesus Christ are called to do this work in a world that is changing. It is more challenging than ever to do this important work. There is unbelief all around us. Yet, we can do this work together. It is not meant to be done alone.

Jesus sent his disciples out two by two and does the same with us. The future of the church isn't in the hands of one singular person, it isn't in the hands of St. David's alone. It's in the hands of all followers of Christ. That is why it's important to do this work together. No matter who you are, no matter where you come from, you are needed in the eyes of Jesus. He is sending you out to bring the love of Christ to everyone.

One of the joys of Mission Philadelphia was exposing some of our youth to places they've never experienced before and places that are 30 minutes down the road. The work can continue to take place. It doesn't have to stop after the five-day mission trip. We have already begun talking with Trinity Solebury about going back with both groups for a day in the fall and spring before we take the trip again next summer. There was great joy in realizing how powerful it is to do this work together.

During the last day of our trip, The African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas prepared an amazing dinner for all who participated in Mission Philly. It was a great time of fellowship after five days of hard work, and five days of doing God's work in our city. All thirty-eight people gathered together in one room, sharing stories, and talking about their highs and lows from the week. As we departed there were smiles, hugs, and see you soon, since everyone knows that we have more work to do, because Christ has called us to do it.

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