



BIBLE STUDY

ACT BOLDLY FOR MISSION
SESSION 2

Like the First Evangelists

by Kelly Fryer

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Jesus has always chosen those who may seem to be the most unlikely people to share the Good News. In this session we'll look at the stories of just a few of them, including the man who had a "legion" of demons . . . the Samaritan woman . . . and the Seventy whose names we don't know. What can we learn from these stories about our identity as evangelical people, created by the Holy Spirit and called by Jesus to participate in God's mission to love and bless and save the whole world?

Introduction

It happens in my house, too. On Saturday night, without fail, somebody will ask, "So, what time are we going to church in the morning?"

"Ten," I usually say without a blink.

Or "eight-thirty," depending on how late the question is asked.

Once in while, though, when I'm feeling a little feisty, I'll say, "We're not going to church in the morning."

"What?!?" come the surprised responses. "Why not?!"

"Because we *are* the church, remember. Tomorrow, we're going to meet up with the rest of the church for worship."

Mostly they all just roll their eyes at me and hope they don't have to hear the sermon again, the one where I remind them that the church isn't a building, the church is *people*. They've heard this one a thousand times.

"You're a freak, Mom," my son says. I just smile.

"You asked," I say.

Imagine this

Imagine if somebody who didn't know any better tried to figure out who Jesus is on the basis of what Jesus' followers do and the things that seem important to us. Imagine if they sat in on a few council meetings, attended a few worship services, joined a couple of committees. Imagine if they took a peek at our budgets.

Pretty quickly they might jump to the conclusion that Jesus came to start a church.

It's not all we do, of course. But we Christians do tend to spend a lot of our time, energy, and money keeping the institution afloat. The way we do church together today is very expensive. And I'm not saying it's wrong. For example, having a building where people can gather makes it possible to do all kinds of stuff together it would be hard to do otherwise (especially for those of us who live in northern climes!).

Buildings give us a place to celebrate and mourn, to worship and learn. Buildings give us a space to share with our neighbors and a place to have potluck suppers.

We could make the same kind of defense for why it's important for us to have program budgets and staff budgets and all the rest. These things aren't necessarily wrong. But they are expensive. And it seems that, in more and more places, it takes more and more effort to keep it all going.

It's no wonder confusion sometimes

sets in and even we find ourselves thinking that “the church” is the most important thing.

But Jesus did not come to start a church.

> GET TO WORK!

Now would be a good time to go back to Luke 4:16–21 and really spend some time listening for God’s voice in that story. Read it out loud and then reflect on it in silence for three or four minutes. Then talk about what it says about why Jesus came.

On center stage

The mission Jesus was on went way beyond starting a church. Jesus came as a part of God’s mission to love and bless and save the whole world. Jesus was there when this mission began, at the very beginning of creation.

The Gospel writer, John, put it this way: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:1–5). And when John said “the Word,” he meant *Jesus*. Keep reading: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Jesus will be there when God’s mission is fulfilled, too. Writing in code so that the Romans would not understand his words that were meant to encourage Christians suffering persecution at their hands, John of Patmos promised that the future belongs to God: “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life

with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads” (Revelation 22:1–4). The “Lamb,” of course, is Jesus.

From beginning to end, Jesus is at the very center of God’s mission to reconcile and justify and make all things new.

> GET TO WORK!

These two passages, from John and then from the Book of Revelation, describe the role Jesus plays in God’s ongoing mission. The language and elaborate imagery they use are very different from the simple stories Luke says Jesus told during his ministry.

Think for a minute about all the different types of literature that appear in the Bible . . . poems, historical reports, letters, songs, parables, and so on. Each one serves a different purpose, kind of like each part of a newspaper (editorials, sports, news, weather, and so on) serves its own purpose.

Why do you think John and the author of Revelation chose the approach they did to talk about “the beginning” and “the end?” Go back and read that passage from John 1:1–5, 14 again. What do you hear God saying to you through these words? Now do the same thing with that passage from Revelation 22:1–4.

In, with, and for the world

Jesus is at the heart of God’s mission in the world, from beginning to end. He did not come to start a church. He came for the sake of the world: “For God so loved *the world*,” John wrote, “that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16). The fact is, the horizon of *all*

God's activity is the world. That's where God's eyes are fixed.

Through Jesus, God's love and blessing and salvation come to us because we are, of course, part of the world. Those of us who by faith receive the gift of God's salvation through Christ are called Christians. Together, we are the church. And, *through* us, the Good News of God's loving mission to bring reconciliation is made known through all the world.

> GET TO WORK!

Want to hear what Jesus himself said about who we are and what our job is, as the church? Read John 20:19–23 right now. When Jesus says “as the Father has sent me,” what do you think that means? How did the Father send Jesus? What does this passage tell you about yourself?

To be the church is to be in, with, and for the world.

“In, with, and for the world,” huh? Chew on that together for a minute or two. Do you know any Christians who think or act like being the church means being apart from the world? You might even know some who are afraid of the world or think it's evil. What would you like to tell them?

Sometimes, of course, being *for* the world means being *against* the world, just like when your kids are doing something that is dangerous or wrong, being *for* them means challenging and maybe even working to change them. But being the church is never about leaving the world. God loves the world! Through us, God is at work making it holy and whole. In fact, making the world holy and whole is the point of being the church. And if we're not doing *that* then we're not the church at all.

No experience necessary

Jesus didn't come to start a church. He came to show God's love for the whole world. He came to heal and to teach and to save. And, as he did that, he gathered a crowd. Some of those who assembled realized that he wasn't kidding when he said the kingdom of God had come near. They were changed by that encounter. And when Jesus said, “Hey, you want to come along and help?” they followed him. They were the church. Long before there were church buildings or seminaries to train pastors or even a book with the story of Jesus written down in it, *they were the church.*

The church is people.

And, today, the church is us.

We are the church when we get together to celebrate and to mourn, to worship and to learn and to serve. But we are also the church when we are at home, at work, at school, having coffee with the neighbor, doing our shopping, paying our taxes, marking the ballot. We are the church wherever we go. It is our job, in all those places, to share the good news of God's love in everything we say and everything we do.

> GET TO WORK!

How are you doing so far? In one way, there is nothing earth-shattering about any of these ideas: The church is in, with, and for the world—participating in God's loving mission to make all things new—or it isn't the church. The church is people. We are the church whenever we gather and wherever we go. Etc., etc., etc.

I mean, how can you argue with any of that? On the other hand, this is a totally radical way of thinking about what it means to be the church. If we actually functioned that way, most of our congregations would look totally different. Our lives would look different. Want to talk about this awhile? Go ahead. Talk.

Are you back? Okay. I'm guessing one of the things that came up in your conversation is how utterly unprepared a lot of people—including, maybe, you—feel to *be* this kind of church.

Well, don't.

There is no experience necessary to be the church. The first people who answered Jesus' call to follow him certainly didn't have any. And this is no big secret, either. In fact, at least one early church leader made a point of reminding everybody that following Jesus does not require any special talent or any sort of super faith or any some kind of remarkable ability:

“Consider your own call, brothers and sisters,” the apostle Paul told his Christian friends in a town called Corinth. “Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1 Corinthians 1:26).

> GET TO WORK!

The Corinthians had been fighting among themselves about who the best Christians were. Paul heard about this and sent them this letter. But, seriously, can you imagine yourself getting this letter from Paul . . . tearing it open all excited to hear from your friend . . . and hearing this?! Would you have been angry—or thankful—to be told the truth? Who in your life tells you the truth now? Who can you count on to say the hard things you need to hear?

Read Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:26 again. What truth do you hear for you in them?

Paul was being a little harsh, maybe. But he wasn't trying to be cruel. He just wanted his friends to remember that, when it comes to stuff like saving the world, it's all God. It's *all* God.

“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise,” he said. “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and

despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God” (1 Corinthians 1:27–29). In fact, if you're going to boast, Paul says, “boast in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:31).

The first evangelists

Sometimes Christians do give the impression that we have it all together. Sometimes we even have rules—written and unwritten—that make it clear that people who don't have it all together (and that gets defined in many ways) aren't welcome. But there is no experience necessary to be a follower of Jesus or to participate in God's loving mission to save the world.

In fact, the very first followers of Jesus were the most unlikely bunch of people *ever*. Let's meet some of them.

> GET TO WORK!

Spend some time getting to know one or two of Jesus' first followers. Chose from the man who had a “legion” of demons (Mark 5:1–20), the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–39), and the Seventy whose names we don't even know (Luke 10:1–12, 17–20). You may not be able to spend time with more than one of these people in this session. If you do, take their stories one at a time. Read the story out loud. After each story, spend time talking about these three questions:

- 1. What is this story about?**
- 2. What do you hear God saying to you in this story?**
- 3. What do you hear God saying to us, as a group or as a congregation or the whole church, together?**

Take as much time as you need doing this. It is the most important part of this whole session.

If you took the stories of these people—the Gerasene

demoniac, the Samaritan woman, and the Seventy whose names we do not know—and added them to the stories of all the other people who first followed Jesus, you would get a very interesting picture of what God thinks it takes to be an evangelist (or a missionary or a minister or a disciple or whatever fancy word you want to put in here to describe you and your call to be a part of what God is up to in the world). It takes:

- Having an encounter with Jesus during which he does something to you: heals you or forgives you or challenges you or questions you or calls you or sends you or whatever, and

- Doing or saying something to somebody else about it.

Yep. It's as simple as that. 🌿

Kelly Fryer, who holds master of divinity and master of theology degrees, is author of the best-selling *Reclaiming the L Word: Renewing the Church from Its Lutheran Core* and writer for the *No Experience Necessary* Bible study series (both from Augsburg Fortress). She is executive director of A.R.E.: A Renewal Enterprise, a company that provides organizational consulting and leadership coaching.

As a community of women created in the image of God, called to discipleship in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we commit ourselves to grow in faith, affirm our gifts, support one another in our callings, engage in ministry and action, and promote healing and wholeness in the church, the society, and the world.

—The Purpose Statement of Women of the ELCA