

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
July 7, 2019

The other day, I was sitting at a table with someone I hadn't talked to for awhile. It was pleasant to catch up a bit, and then she asked me how my mentoring was going. For a minute, I thought she was talking about people who mentor me — people I turn to for advice and counsel. But actually, she was talking about the people that I am mentoring. And I kind of balked, because I don't feel old enough, experienced, or wise enough to tell anyone anything. Mentors are other people; not me.

A similar thing happened in college when I was teaching violin at a summer intensive music camp for high school students. People kept calling me Mr. Burch, and I would instantly look behind me assuming that my dad was standing there. Mr. Burch? Even the idea can give me a shudder. Titles, accolades, and mentoring are for other people; more experienced people; wiser people.

The phenomenon of feeling deeply ill-equipped for a job is pretty common. I hear new parents talk about it. I also hear it when a tragedy happens — well-wishers feeling like they can't possibly find the correct way to respond and believing that other people can. The older I get, the more I believe that most people feel like they're just faking it as best they can most of the time.

In the late 70s, an article was published by two psychiatrists who coined a phrase to describe this pretty common phenomenon. They called this feeling that we're unqualified for our own lives, "imposter syndrome." They found that people of all ages, classes, and occupations can get a funny feeling that everyone else in their office got into their position through hard work, while we, the imposters, have just gotten in through dumb luck. Can I really be the chair of a department? Can I really be the parent to three people? Can I really buy a house? Those seem like the adult things that other people do, while some of us still feel like we're barely making due and will be found out any minute.

If most people feel like imposters sometimes, how much more so if you've dedicated your life to following Jesus Christ. Today's Gospel follows an exchange between the 70 disciples that Jesus calls and sends out. They go out into the world announcing the kingdom of God and curing the sick. Then they come back to Jesus and seem surprised that it worked. I just imagine 70 disciples all with the same imposter syndrome that most of us have at one time or another. Jesus basically says to them, "Of course it worked; you are following ME; I am the power behind you."

It seems to be pretty common for contemporary Christians to have the same doubts and worries as those early followers of Jesus. You want me to go out into the world and do what?

At the risk of oversharing, I'll tell you I don't ever feel particularly well qualified to follow Jesus. I just assume that there are people holier, wiser, kinder, harder working. Etc. etc.. Perhaps you have thought the same thing.

But here is the truth — just as true for us today as it was for the 70 who were sent out by Jesus: we are it. We are the feet and the hands of Christ. There are no others. There are not people holier, wiser, working harder, or more committed than us. We're it.

You were not chosen to serve God because of some extraordinary ability. You are extraordinary because you chose to serve God. That's it. No secret or certificate or degree. You just said yes.

The task hasn't changed too much either. Walk into a place; announce that the reign of God is near. Heal those who want healing; move on from those who don't. It's a simple formula. You're going to feel like an imposter some of the time, and that's okay. All of us other disciples are as well.

And what happens when we answer the call? The 8 o'clockers have heard this story before, but you all haven't. At a conference recently, I got to hear a presentation from a tiny church called St. Columba's in the Florida Keys. They had thirty regularly worshippers during the winter and twelve during the summer. They got a new priest, and she asked them what kind of ministry they wanted to do. At first, they lamented that there were too few people to do anything that might be called ministry. But the priest pushed them to think about how they wanted to answer the call of Jesus in their time and their place. "Oh we're not big enough; oh we don't have enough money; oh we can't do the right kind of ministry that those big churches are doing." They felt like imposters.

But the priest worked with them to look around their immediate community and figure out what needed doing. It turns out that in tourist economies like the Florida Keys, there are lots of lower-wage workers that have no money to afford high-quality after-school programs to bridge childcare from the end of school to when the parents returned from work — often at 6 pm to as late as 9 pm.

And so this group of twelve people looked seriously at the immediate need in their community and then looked at their assets — they had people, they had a little money, they had an attitude of service, and they had space. And so that little church started an after-school program — high quality with homework help, field trips, nutritious snacks, and wholesome entertainment. And you know what? A church of twelve people was soon supporting an absolutely free after school program for 60 kids. Ten years later, their church of twelve people now has one hundred and ten on a Sunday regularly.

These were not superheroes of ministry. They were exactly like you and exactly like me. And they had the power to cast out the demons of loneliness from kids and the demons of fear from their parents. And then they cast out the demons of scarcity from themselves.

We can do that, my friends. There are needs within walking distance of this church. And there are assets in this room. All we have to do is figure out which matches with what, and we are in the God business.

You are the hands and the feet of Christ. You are empowered and sent out to heal this world. There is no one better. There is no one else. There is you. Amen.