

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 10: 40 - 42

Emmanuel Episcopal Church

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Today is the 3rd Sunday on which the Gospel reading has come from the 10th chapter of Matthew. This is the chapter in which Jesus, having called his disciples together, tells them they are to go out among the villages and take the message that the Kingdom of God (Matthew always calls it “The Kingdom of Heaven”) is coming near. Today’s passage concludes Jesus’ instructions to his disciples and focuses on those in the world who will hear the message and be judged by how they respond.

The more I read the Gospels, the more sympathy I have for Jesus’ disciples. They are certainly imperfect in their humanity, and they often fail in astonishing ways to understand who and what Jesus is. But they realize that He is revealing a truth to them and living it out in a way that is so compelling they cannot turn their eyes and hearts away from it. Look, He tells them as he heals the sick and raises the dead and cleanses lepers and casts out demons – Look, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. And even though they never seem quite to get it, they know their very lives depend on being with him, listening to him, following him. Their devotion to Jesus is

the manifestation of their yearning for what is eternal and true in the midst of impermanence and falsehood.

The experiences of the disciples come down to their answer to the question, “Who do you say that I am?” All of them, like all of us, must decide in their own way the answer to the question. How we answer the question - our doubts, our betrayals, our affirmations of faith and trust - is the substance of our spiritual lives. “Who do I say that He is?” And of equal importance: “how do I respond to Him?”

So the disciples – some like Peter, James and John well-known and some like Thaddeus and Simon the Cananaean little more than names – represent **us** as the story of their friendship with Jesus unfolds and deepens. Who is this Jesus? What is He asking – perhaps even demanding – of me?

It is about 1/3 of the way through the gospel of Matthew, in the 10th of its 28 chapters, that Jesus calls his disciples together and tells them they are to go out and do what they have seen Him doing: proclaim the good news that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. Like Him, too, they are to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. He gives the disciples a long set of specific instructions and warnings – go only to Jewish towns, don’t take any gold or silver or anything else to sustain you, be aware that you will encounter danger. He tells them that he is sending

them among wolves and that they should be as clever as serpents but also as innocent as doves. He tells them that they should not fear but should remember that the Father numbers the hairs on their heads and knows when each sparrow falls: and you, Jesus, tells them, are of more value than many sparrows. Be willing to lose your life for my sake, he tells them, and in losing it you will find it.

I can't think that these words of Jesus struck all the disciples as a positive turn of events. I think had I been a disciple, I would just be settling into my role as follower. Maybe beginning to feel a little comfortable. I had probably been present at the Sermon on the Mount and would still be mulling over the way Jesus had turned all the wisdom of my culture upside down: I had been taught "blessed are the rich, the powerful, the dominant, the religious and political authorities," but Jesus subverted all this: Not so, he said, "blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those persecuted for righteousness sake." I was probably witness to the healings of a leper, a paralyzed man, a woman with a hemorrhage, two blind men; I may have been in the boat when Jesus calmed the storm; and I probably had either seen or heard from another disciple how Jesus raised from the dead the daughter of a leader of the synagogue. (All these events

Matthew recounts before Chapter 10.) I had been confused but enlightened, awe struck, terrified, overwhelmed with the presence of love and kindness in the man I had accepted as my master. But to think that I could tell others about the Kingdom of Heaven which I was just beginning to grasp mentally and emotionally, let alone do any healings of sick or raisings of dead: how could I do that? I would need more training, more sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening. I am sure I would have felt I was absolutely unprepared to go out on my own and do what I had witnessed Jesus doing. I just would not have been ready.

Matthew doesn't tell us how or what the disciples did in response to Jesus' commissioning them. This gospel doesn't even make it clear that the disciples actually went out through the country and announced that the Kingdom of Heaven was near and healed the sick as they were told to do. This gap in the story has been the subject of some speculation: did the gospel writer just forget to follow through? Or did he think the disciples waited until after the resurrection, especially since Matthew's gospel ends with the "Great Commission": "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?"

There is an answer, though, in the other two synoptic gospels, Mark and Luke. Mark says, “. . . they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.” Luke says, “They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.” And in both Mark and Luke, just as in Matthew, this commissioning and sending forth occurs about 1/3 through the story.

Why is that significant? Because at this point in the story, the disciples do not know what the end will be. They have not yet seen the growing animosity of the authorities towards Jesus, nor heard the great parables – the sower and the seed, the lost sheep, the laborers in the vineyard - which amplify in stories the radical lessons of the Sermon on the Mount, nor witnessed Jesus’s Transfiguration, nor watched in astonishment as small amounts of bread and fish feed 5000 and – on another occasion - 4000, nor watched in horror from a safe but cowardly distance as Jesus was arrested, tortured, and crucified, nor experienced the surprising and life changing joy of His resurrection, nor felt the sudden empowering love of the Holy Spirit in its Pentecostal fire and wind. You might say that the disciples when Jesus decides to send them out on their own are not yet “complete.”

Despite this, though, they take a deep breath and go out into the world. “The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,” they say to everyone who welcomes them, “And He will negate your illness and death and bless you with health and life. And that is what we are sent to proclaim” The disciples are all imperfect human beings, and they don’t fully understand what they or God is doing, and they are spiritually still being formed, and yet they do what Jesus tells them to, which is essentially to be Him in the world. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,” he tells them. “And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” Jesus’ words here anticipate his later words in the Gospel of John: “I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” We are not separate, my friends, He says to his disciples and to us. Surprise, surprise, we are all one!

Like the disciples, each of us – as the profound cliché has it – is a work in progress. No one of us is yet complete and perfect. In general we have good intentions and good will, but we want to wait until **w**e are ready to answer God’s call to be His presence in the world, and it is that desire to wait that prevents us from hearing and responding to God. But God is inviting us now, at every moment, both to move inward into deeper intimacy with Him and to move outward as a unique manifestation of Him in the world. To receive His love and to give it to others. Now.

Jesus' commissioning his disciples to carry his good news into the world is indeed Jesus' commissioning us to do the same. Jesus warned his disciples that he was sending them into the midst of wolves. There are many wolves around us - division, disease, ignorance, corruption, lies, inequities of all sorts, and hatred, mostly hatred. We have been given the good news, however, and it is this: The Kingdom of Heaven is near and it is Love. The sick in body, mind, and spirit are being cured; the dead are being raised; lepers are being cleansed and demons cast out. We have been given this good news and we have also been commissioned to proclaim it. May God give us grace and power to do that, to do it now – in our words and actions. And to do it in love, always in love. Amen.