

Proper 6 – June 18, 2023

Genesis 18:1-15

Psalm 116:1, 10-17

Romans 5:1-8

Matthew 9:35-10:8

The Rev. Natalie Johnson

Matthew begins our Gospel reading today by telling us that Jesus' ministry was in full swing. He had been traveling through the towns and cities, preaching about the nearness of God's reign.

Jesus' proclamations were no empty words: everywhere he went, he cured the sick, healed the paralyzed, and casted out demons.

As he traveled, he encountered folks who were harassed and helpless, distressed and thrown down, oppressed and dispirited. These were the people whose backs were pushed up against the wall, suffering under the heavy hand of Roman occupation and the weight of religious discrimination.

They came out in droves to hear Jesus speak, to receive his healing touch, and to seek the liberation he offered. As he encountered their suffering, their longing for something different, Jesus responded with compassion.

Surrounded by the disinherited, Jesus bid his disciples to look upon the crowds, "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few..."

See the suffering of the people, he told them. See their yearning to taste the sweet hope of liberation. Tap into the divine compassion that drives the mission of God in the world, and embody it in the ministry I am sending you out to do.

In saying this, Jesus reminded them that discipleship is no spectator sport. Being a disciple means being a laborer of the harvest. Being a disciple means teaching what Jesus taught, doing what Jesus did.

Just as the twelve were not told to go and develop their own mission, so we, as Christ's followers, are not called to plant the harvest.

We're not given an open-ended invitation to do whatever we want and slap a "Christian" label on it. Rather, just like the twelve, we are enlisted into the very mission and ministry of Jesus.

And, like Jesus, our task, our calling, our vocation, is to proclaim the nearness of God's reign, to bring healing to a hurting world.

Christians throughout the ages have read in these words a commissioning not just of the first apostles but to the Church in all times and all places.

The pattern of mission that Jesus lays out to the twelve in our text today is the same pattern that we are given.

Like the apostles, we are summoned by Jesus to be attentive to the suffering around us, given authority to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons.

Like the apostles, we are sent out to proclaim the good news that the reign of God has come near.

The heart of this mission, then and now, is to attend to the suffering of this world, to be agents of healing and liberation, and to bear witness to the fullness of life that God offers.

This work into which we are enlisted is not easy. Jesus tells us that it will put us at odds with the religious and political elite.

The mission and work of living into God's reign will create rifts in our families, will threaten relationships with friends.

Curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers, and casting out demons – these are the works that come from being attentive to suffering and responding with compassion to those who are "harassed and helpless," and doing this work will

surely place us in the line of fire from those who benefit most from ignoring the plight of the oppressed and dispirited.

“Curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers, and casting out demons” – In our contemporary moment, it is easy to get tripped up on these tasks of God’s mission.

We see them as descriptions of things that we attribute to the supernatural leanings of the ignorant.

These are not the works that disciples of Christ in our day and age can be called to because, who of us can heal a sick person?

Who actually believes in demon possession? Leprosy is outside the scope of our typical experience, so what does that have to do with us?

And, who has ever heard of anyone actually being raised from the dead apart from serious medical intervention?

I wonder, though, if these questions miss the point. If there isn’t something significant here that we miss about what it means to be a disciple of Christ if we just shrug them off as archaic ignorance.

In one of the articles I read for this week’s lessons, the commentator suggested that we struggle to understand these missional tasks because they are so far out of our range of experience that we don’t easily connect with them.

What might curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers, and casting out demons look like in our present moment?

What if, instead of seeing them as supernatural nonsense, we see them as a call to wake up to the suffering experienced in our midst.

What if we see curing the sick as our call to fight the policies and systems that leave millions in our society without adequate healthcare, without access to affordable medication?

What if curing the sick is about addressing not just the symptoms or the disease but the full range of circumstances that perpetuate sickness and ill-health? What if curing the sick entails fighting for the health autonomy of women and trans-folk?

What if raising the dead is less about bringing corpses to life and more about challenging and dismantling the death-dealing systems that leave large portions of our population barely scraping by?

What if raising the dead is about dismantling the scaffolding that structures our justice system that disproportionately targets communities of color and protects the privilege and benefits of being white?

What if we see cleansing the lepers as our call to stand with the marginalized of our society, to lift up the outcast, to be companions and accomplices with those the rest of the society deems “untouchable?”

What if cleansing the lepers means reaching out our hands in friendship with the people who live on our street corners or taking a stand between bigots and the targets of their hate or calling out our coworkers or family members or friends for their phobic comments and behaviors?

And what if casting out demons is our call to liberate people from the things that keep them in bondage?

What if casting out demons means companioning people who are struggling with addiction?

What if casting out demons is our call to hear the voices of the voiceless and to march in the street with them, to engage our political leaders to listen to their demands, and to strive for justice and peace until black lives matter, until queer folk can be their full selves without fear, until children no longer need to practice active shooter drills...?

No, this work is not easy. The work of God's mission is risky, it will put us at odds with the powerful.

Our proclamation of the reign of God is a threat to everything that protects their status and their power.

And yet, we are not left to our own devices – the very Spirit of God is with us, remains with us, speaks through us, empowers us!

Friends, the crowds are filling the streets of our villages and our cities. They are telling us of their suffering and Jesus is summoning us to respond.

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few...ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers” and then “go...proclaim the good news that the ‘kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.”