
Second Sunday after Pentecost (14 June 2020)**Lectionary Reading: Matthew 9:35-10:8**

For a number of years I used to drop Nicole off at a church where she was involved in Youth ministry. As you drove out from the church there was a large sign at the gate that said, “You are Now Entering the Mission Field.”

Here I’m reminded of a “Peanuts” comic strip. Charlie Brown and Lucy were walking, and Lucy said, “I could be a great missionary.” Charlie Brown asked why, and she said, “I convinced a boy in school that my religion is better than his religion.” Charlie Brown asked how she did that, and she answered, “I hit him over the head with my lunch box.”

That sign, however, would certainly be appropriate for our reading from Matthew’s gospel this morning.

Today’s gospel reading from Matthew begins the second great discourse by Jesus, sometimes known as the Sermon on Mission. It follows on from his first discourse, the well-known Sermon on the Mount with its focus on living as Christians in the world. Today, however, we move away from responsibilities to ourselves, and instead begin to emphasize our responsibilities towards others.

For several chapters before this story, Jesus has been traveling around, healing and teaching, and the crowds are building. More and more people keep coming, with their pain and their need and their troubles “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd,” as Jesus describes them. As he looks on them, Jesus perceives their hurt and brokenness – he can see the great need – people who yearn to hear a message of hope; who want the healing presence of God to come into their lives; who need care and compassion.

Jesus' reaction probably wasn't any different to that of our own reaction to how fragmented and wounded the world is today. Watch the news on TV, scan the Internet or read the front page of any newspaper and we can't help but think, "I knew things in the world were bad, but this bad?"

Maybe this was the moment when Jesus realized he couldn't adequately address all the pain, despair and need by himself. The situation was desperate, and the need was urgent. And so it was time "to send out laborers into the Lord's harvest..."

So Jesus calls to himself his closest followers, the twelve disciples, the ones who'd been with him the longest and observed the most closely. Jesus seems to have decided that they knew enough, were formed and shaped and changed enough, to be sent out as apostles to share the mission and ministry with him, to do the very work he had been doing and for them to continue after he was gone.

When Jesus picked out his twelve, he obviously didn't demand a substantial set of theological qualifications. He didn't seem to care whether they had unusual spiritual insight or proven ability. He didn't seek the best and brightest but the ordinary. He selected a group of mostly lacklustre and untested commoners.

One was young and inexperienced. Some were unexceptional fishermen. Many grew up in the rocky upland region of Galilee. One was a fanatical Jewish Nationalist. Several argued among themselves about who was the greatest disciple. One was a traitor to his own people, making a living collecting taxes for Caesar from them. Peter denied even knowing Jesus when the chips were down. And yet Jesus sent out these, his first apostles,

to bear the power of God into the struggle with evil, to heal the sick, and to bring the reconciliation of love.

Did they do it perfectly? Not at all. The gospels and the book of Acts tell us over and over again of the ways they missed the mark, dropped the ball, and fell over their own feet. They couldn't understand the parables, didn't know what he meant when he predicted his own death, slept through his last agonized hours, deserted him as he went to judgment and the cross, barely recognized him when he appeared to them as the risen Christ, and hadn't a clue what to do when he ascended into heaven. One of them even sold him to the enemy government for thirty pieces of silver. And yet -- and yet....

There is a church around the world today, witnessing in every nation to the Good News of God in Christ. The sun never sets on the Christian hope, the faith that proclaims the good news even in the darkest hour, the ocean depths of the love of God. All because the disciples, imperfect as they were, answered the challenge of Jesus to be sent out to proclaim the good news: "The Kingdom of God has come near."

The important lesson for us today is that we Christians of the 21st century are similarly called. The image of "sheep without a shepherd" in this Gospel text calls us to reach out into our world, and to see all of God's children as precious and loved and deserving of our attention, energy, resources, and care. It speaks of a world that is looking to the church, to us, people of faith, with questions and doubts and real, human needs.

Of course, the dangers we face are seldom as dramatic as those faced by Jesus' apostles. Still, remaining faithful in following Jesus remains a formidable task. But there is hope because we bear significant resemblance to the commonplace apostles.

Perhaps Jesus knew better than to invite experienced leaders or exceptional examples. He needed down-to-earth, vulnerable, and ordinary people – a kind of people who were representative of the general population and understood their pain and fears. In other words our ordinariness is not a hindrance unless we choose to make it so.

Who among Jesus' disciples was really suited to carry out God's work – and who among us is qualified to proclaim the Gospel to an unbelieving world and share God's love in action among those around us? Who, in any generation, is qualified to heal a broken world in Jesus' name? And yet, like Jesus' original disciples we can find the courage and the wherewithal to accept the command to follow Jesus into mission for this generation.

Who among us, for example, could have felt qualified to face an unprecedented challenge posed by the coronavirus – isolated in our homes at a time of physical separation of the Body of Christ? Nevertheless, in parish after parish and community after community – time after time – “unqualified” and untrained people rose to the occasion and accepted the hard mission to provide a remarkable closeness filled with love.

But maybe we should have expected this development because throughout Christian history, the apostles have been replaced by a never-ending series of others who continued to carry out the never-ending instructions of Jesus to go out among the people as his agents of love. Every one of us is empowered to do so, not because of our abilities or readiness, but because of the Holy Spirit. (Medieval History).

Jesus in the first century saw in his disciples a potential they could not see in themselves. The church recognizes this in baptism. By the nature of our baptisms, we have been authorized to be disciples in the same way as those first called by Jesus.

God's perspective is that what needs doing in the world requires ordinary people, like most of us. God's work requires the very experiences we have had at work, or at school, or at play or raising a family, or doing whatever is normal for us – all of which we can use to help others.

God needs today's apostles to utilize a great variety of gifts and skills and experiences to carry out a task no less daunting than that of the first disciples -- the continuing business of proclaiming the good news to those who do not know God and for carrying out the imperatives of the Gospel - loving our neighbours as ourselves, bringing about justice and peace, providing for those in need.

Jesus delighted in taking ordinary, everyday people – those who did not seem to possess great qualifications or credentials - and calling them to become his disciples. He does the same for us. And the Holy Spirit makes available to us all we need to be successful as we remain faithful to Jesus and his mission. He sends us out into the world proclaiming a word of salvation to a dying world, helping heal a broken people - being Jesus' apostles for this generation.

The Lord be with you