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Sunday, June 14th, 2020
St. John's Lutheran Church
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Matthew 9:35-10:8 [9-23]

35 Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few;³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."¹ Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John;³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus;⁴ Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans,⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.⁷ As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near."⁸ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. [9 Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts,¹⁰ no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food.¹¹ Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave.¹² As you enter the house, greet it.¹³ If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.¹⁴ If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.¹⁵ Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom

and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.¹⁶ "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.¹⁷ Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues;¹⁸ and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles.¹⁹ When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time;²⁰ for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.²¹ Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death;²² and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.²³ When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.]

Second Reading

Romans 5:1-8

1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.⁷ Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Well, here it comes. I can feel it. Can you?

The temptation to move on. To forget. To look away. To think, “I’ve done my part. I’ve read an article, I’ve watched a PBS special or two on racism in America. I’ve downloaded Ibram Kendi’s book *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. I haven’t started it, but I probably will. So, that’s pretty good. Time to keep calm and carry on. Time to let the legislature and the really dedicated activists do the work from here.”

Those are the voices and the inklings I can feel and find in myself. How about you?

I heard a famous preacher say this week, “Well, if you did your racism sermon last week, then maybe it’s time for something different this week.”

Well, we’ve had two sermons on racism here at St. John’s. That’s enough, right?

For me, as the preacher, the fear, of course, is that you will find another sermon on racism to be homiletically aggressive. Or discouraging and deflating. Or worst of all – boring and repetitive.

But to even have a choice of topics this morning, an array of options from which to choose that might be engaging simply goes to show just how privileged my everyday life is. To get to choose when to think deeply about the role of race in my life, the life of the church, and the life of this country, and when to not think about it.

But we can’t. We cannot move on. We cannot look away. Too many have said this time feels different. Maybe real change will come from this. Maybe the suffering this time around really will produce endurance. Which will produce character. Which will produce real

hope, as Paul says. So, we cannot look away. We cannot move on. We continue to have too much to learn.

An artists in the black community said this past week, “These are tough days watching (people) wake up from history.”

He was talking about people like me.

I confess that I just learned this week about the Tulsa Race Massacre that happened 99 years ago. Where mobs of white residents attacked black residents and businesses, from the ground and from the air, destroying 35 blocks of the wealthiest black community in the United States at the time. Over 800 people injured and possibly as many as 300 killed. I never learned about this or didn't care enough to pay attention. And only this year 2020 was this tragedy finally included in Oklahoma's school curriculum.

We cannot move on. We have too much to learn. We cannot look away. Especially, not this week.

You see, on Wednesday, it'll be 5 years. 5 years since a young man – who grew up in an ELCA church – took the lives of Sharonda, Cynthia, Susie, Ethel, DePayne, Clementa, Tywanza, Daniel, and Myra at a Wednesday evening bible study at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. That was 5 years ago. And last I heard, prior to COVID-19, they *still* had that Bible study on the weekly schedule. Which is a profound act of resistance and a witness to the faith of that community.

Friday of this week also marks Juneteenth - a holiday, I confess, I knew very little about until recent years. This Friday will mark the 155th Anniversary since the Emancipation Proclamation – the declaration that

all slaves are free – was read to newly free African Americans in Texas – the last Confederate state to hear this proclamation. That’s this Friday.

We cannot move on. We cannot look away. Not just yet. As Jesus said in the gospel reading, the harvest is plentiful – meaning there is a lot of work to do. But the laborers – the laborers are few. Will the work get done? Will enough people join in to do it?

You see, in light of what’s happened and what’s in front of us, I’m both convicted and comforted by this week’s Gospel reading.

Listen again. Our reading begins by telling us about Jesus’ ministry to all the cities and villages. To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God come near. To cure every disease and sickness. Which means the scope of Jesus’ ministry is wide. There is a wideness in God’s mercy, the hymn tells us.

But it is not a generic mercy and ministry. This is not the routine bag of swag handed out to each person at a faith conference, as if we all get doled out the same thing. You see the good news of Jesus *will* move on to places like Samaria and the Gentiles. Just not today. Because today, there is a crowd around Jesus – a crowd that is harassed and helpless. They need Jesus’ full attention. And the text says he had compassion for them. Actually, the Greek word means “to be moved in your guts.” In your stomach. To the core of your body and being.

The crowd was harassed and helpless. Lost – like sheep without a shepherd. And Jesus has a gut-wrenching love for them.

And so Jesus’ gathers up his disciples. That’s what the text says. He summoned his twelve *disciples*. Disciple – a Greek word for student or learner. Jesus gathered his 12 learners. And gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out and to cure every disease and sickness.

And then. And then in the reading, in the story, the word – the title - for these followers of Jesus *changes*. In the very next verse, it says...” And these are the names of the twelve *apostles*...”

Apostle – a Greek word that means to be sent out. As a delegate. A messenger. In one verse – they go from being the 12 disciples to the 12 apostles. We often interchange those words. Disciple of Jesus, apostle of Jesus. Same thing.

But they aren't. Not here.

You see this is the *disciples'* graduation day. They've done the learning, now it's time for the doing. They've passed the in-class or online disciple's drivers permit test. Now it is time to get behind the wheel of faith. But don't worry, Jesus won't just hand over the keys to the newbies and leave them on their own. The Holy Spirit is the passenger, right beside them.

You see, here is the thing – you can be a disciple but never step out and up to be an apostle. We can learn and learn about the grace and challenge of Jesus that is for us but never leave the comfort of our privilege to carry that gospel word to all people. To live it out in the world.

We are called not to just be disciples of Jesus. We are called to be apostles. The ones who are sent out.

And it won't be easy. Jesus says we will not be paid for curing the disease that plagues us. We will not be reimbursed for lifting up the lowly, resurrecting those who have died being held down.

Jesus warns us that some will receive this good news and receive this peace kindly.

And some won't.

But that rejection does not make the good news any less true and it should not slow us. If we are rejected, then we are to shake the dust from our feet and go on to the next house.

But it won't be easy. Jesus warns us that he is sending us out like sheep in the midst of wolves. And as my seminary professor put it so succinctly – *there will be wolves*.

So, we are to be alert. Wise like serpents, yet innocent like doves. For we very well maybe dragged before boards and councils, handed over to the politically powerful.

And then Jesus escalates into full-on apocalyptic language. There will be persecution and betrayal and hatred, even among family members. But if we can endure – then we just might find salvation. Not simply salvation for the afterlife – but salvation for this life.

In case it hasn't been obvious, this is not your average church new member program. This is not your best-seller discipleship book about having a purposed driven life and your best life now.

To be sent out as an apostle of Jesus – to be laborers for the kingdom of God that has come near – is to put your entire life on the line.

And now - just as I am starting to feel empowered and brave to be an apostle for Jesus, to head out into the mission field, to proclaim the good news, to rescue and save those lost, vulnerable sheep, to dodge

the wolves, and endure the consequences...suddenly, I realize something.

Maybe it's that I grew up in a predominantly white, affluent church, where being Christian mostly meant being polite and well-behaved in the pew. And no one really raised their voice or pounded their fist for anything of significance, and the primary weekly concern seemed to be that worship be performed without any major mistakes....

Maybe it's that I've felt a calling in my life to pastoral ministry and so I went to seminary, where the language of being a shepherd to a flock, a disciple of Jesus ordained in lineage with the apostles of Jesus is ever present.

Maybe it's because for all of my life as a white person, I've been told that people with black and brown skin "are forever and desperately in need of (my) help."¹

Perhaps for all those reasons, every time I've heard this passage, I've always envisioned myself as one of the disciples. As one of the 12, the special ones set apart and sent out to do ministry for *those* people, who are lost and in need of what I have.

But maybe I've been wrong.

Maybe I am the sheep who is lost, not actually recognizing or seeing the world I live in.

Maybe I am the possessed one with an unclean spirit of racism clinging to my easy life.

¹ <http://agoodchristianwoman.blogspot.com/2020/06/paternalistic-racism-of-nice-white.html>

Maybe I am...the wolf.

Maybe God is not sending me out like an apostle. What if God is sending an apostle out...to me. To find me. To show me the way.

Might we see those who moving their feet and raising their voices, as the apostles, the ones Jesus is sending out today? The ones through whom the Spirit of God is speaking? Sent out into the streets and sent out to knock on my door and call my name and say, "Hey! The harvest is plentiful. There is a lot of work we have to do. There is a disease that has infected this country for over 400 years and we have to cure it. We have to cast out this unclean spirit. God has given us authority to do it. But we need more people. We need you. Will you join us?"

And perhaps the good news, the comfort of this passage – is that someone is willing to give me a chance to join in. Despite my complicity in the spread of this disease. For it is *while we were still sinners* that Christ died for us – not giving up hope on us to be a blessing to this world, despite all our previous indifference to our ways in the world.

And when the knock comes to our door, and our name is called...will our own homes and hearts be worthy of this apostle presence? Or will we be the wolves?

In a moment, we will sing the hymn – *Will You Come and Follow Me?*

And when we sing this hymn, I want you to sing it and hear it not like Jesus is singing to you and all the other apostles in a spiritual huddle before sending you out to all the cities and towns. I want you to sing it like Jesus' apostles have finally reached your front door. They have come to find you.

Will we welcome them? Will we listen to them? Will we join them in the journey? Or will we close the door, leaving them with no choice but shake our dust off their feet, and move on?

Here it comes. I can feel it. Can you? Someone's about to knock on the door and call us each by name. Amen.
