

"The kingdom of heaven has come near."

Matthew 9:35-10:8

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

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We turned a corner this past week—did you notice it? We have now transitioned now into the season after Pentecost, also known as the Season of the Church. Our lectionary texts will focus less on the chronological story of Jesus' life and ministry, as they did in Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. Now, the focus shifts to a discussion of Jesus' followers. We read both about the apostles and the early church, who have been empowered each in their own way to **be** active in Jesus' mission in the world.

It's a subtle shift, one that emphasizes how Jesus chooses to share his ministry with others, and how he gives them the tools necessary to do so. When he sends out the apostles, they're to be an extension of his work, to be his hands, his feet, his voice. They are not simply to be the *beneficiaries* of his ministry, they are called, equipped, and sent to share in his work.

That's the shift: from Jesus just doing his ministry to sharing his ministry with those he's gathered around him. The shift from them being *disciples*—students, learners, followers—to being *apostles*—sent out as Jesus' agents, ambassadors, ministers in their own right. It's a similar thing that's happening as we shift to this second half of the church year. From an emphasis on the life that Jesus *lived* as the incarnate Son of God to the life he *brings* to his followers, to the church, and to the world. And this shift was placed here for our benefit. See, we are not simply called to *admire* Jesus—to hear the story of his ministry and say, "wow, that was some powerful ministry Jesus had back in the day!"

We are not simply called to *observe* the story of his life and ministry as mere spectators. No, this second half of the church year doubles down on Jesus' call to put all of our good intentions, all of our thoughts and prayers, all of our heartfelt words about our faith into action. Because, clearly there is just so much to be done.

See, I think Jesus understood this. We're told he had compassion on the crowds—on the helpless and harassed multitudes who were coming to see him, to hear him, to be healed by him. But as he takes in the sheer magnitude of human suffering, Jesus begins to shift his strategy by introducing something new: the need for other people to join him in his compassionate work. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few," he says. "Pray that the Lord of the harvest will send out laborers into the harvest."

Suddenly, part of Jesus' mission is to *train* followers to join him in the mission God has entrusted to him. Thankfully, their mission is *not* one that they must figure out completely on their own. Jesus gives specific instructions on where to go and

who to visit, on what to say and what to do. We are left with the distinct impression that the twelve are actually defined by their participation in the ongoing movement of the kingdom into the world. Their identity is so bound up in being involved in Jesus' mission, doing his work, that they risk everything to accomplish it. On some level, they know that it is their hands, their feet, their voices, their bodies that are now entrusted with nothing less than the in-breaking of God's kingdom into the world as they know it.

Imagine with me a classic Venn diagram—you know, an image of two distinct circles that intersect one another at a certain point. This is an idea I got from a commentary on the Working Preacher website, by the way.¹ Imagine a Venn Diagram with two circles, one representing the concept of "kingdom" and the other the concept "world." They are not they same—the kingdom of God and the world we live in now—but they do overlap. And Jesus' apostles—and all of us, as Christ's followers in this day and age—they and we have been called, equipped, and sent to occupy the overlap. The place where these two overlap can be pretty intense. Where the work of God meets the trajectory of the world resistance is often greatest—in fact, Jesus later tells them he was sending them out like "sheep into the midst of wolves." They can expect, he tells them, to be handed over to councils, flogged in synagogues, dragged before governors and judges. They will face opposition, division, and stigmas because of Jesus' name, because of Jesus' work.

"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." And this labor can actually be pretty serious stuff. This space we occupy as disciples of Christ can be pretty intense. As Jesus' disciples, as those called, equipped and sent by Christ as laborers in his harvest, we occupy the overlap between the world in which we live and the kingdom of God which we proclaim. We bear witness to the in-breaking of this kingdom of God in a world that all too often seems broken, perhaps even broken beyond repair.

- Sometimes, occupying that overlap means literally feeding the hungry—standing in the gap between those who normally receive free lunches during the school year, but risk being hungry during summer vacation. Proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near."
- Sometimes, occupying that overlap involves risk, literally risking your life to save the life of another, as congressmen Mo Brooks and Brad Wenstrup, and officers David Bailey and Crystal Griner did when a gunman opened fire on batting practice for the Congressional charity baseball game. Proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near."

¹ Colin Yuckman, Commentary on Matthew 9:35-10:8, www.workingpreacher.org, accessed June 17, 2017.

- Sometimes occupying that overlap means sitting with a dear, old friend who no longer recognizes you, who never remembers your visits from one week to the next, who can't always figure out what to do with the communion wafer you've offered her, but who still tears up when you pray the lord's prayer together. Proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near."
- Sometimes occupying that overlap means grieving for the dozens, potentially hundreds of people killed in a raging fire in dangerously sub-standard housing, in what is clearly one of the leading cities of the industrialized world, it means standing with and providing for the hundreds who survived as well as speaking out so that such a thing never to happen again. Proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near."
- Sometimes occupying that overlap means looking into the face of the young, white, Lutheran man just a few days after shot and killed your grandfather at a bible study at Emmanuel AME church in Charleston and to tell him "...Although my grandfather and the others died at the hands of hate, they lived in love, they preached love, and their legacies will be love. This display of forgiveness by the families and our plea for mercy on your soul is a true testament to how they lived and [to the belief] that hate won't win."² Proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near.'
- Sometimes, occupying that overlap between the world as we know it and the incoming kingdom of God means taking to the streets and joining in with a non-violent chorus of lament and rage, marching in disbelief and disappointment after our racially-biased criminal justice system proclaims that fearing for your life that is reason enough to open fire just 74 seconds later. Sometimes, it means crying out, echoing the words of the psalms, "How Long, O Lord," "When will Justice Come?" and "Why do some lives matter more than others?" There is so much work to be done, my friends, so much kingdom work to be done. Pray that the Lord will send out laborers into the harvest, so that we may proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near."

This proclamation can be intense, it can be laborious, it can be lonely, it can seem like it's eternally one step forward and two steps back. But Jesus calls us ALL to share in his ministry, to extend his work beyond the literal or figurative walls constructed around us. We are not just recipients of Christ's love and mercy, we're agents of it as well. We're called, equipped, and sent to participate in the harvest, to stand firmly in that place of grace, to occupy the overlap between the in-breaking Kingdom of God and the world as we know it.

² Alana Simmons (the granddaughter of the Rev. Daniel Simmons) just days after the Chareston Nine were killed on June 17, 2015. From the website www.hatewontwinmovement.com, accessed June 17, 2017.

But this I know, too, this I believe, on this I stand, this kingdom work that Jesus calls us to can also be community-building, meaning-making, life-changing, peace-instilling, joyful, hopeful, satisfying work. Count me among those Sara Miles describes in her wonderful little book *Jesus Freak*: "...[O]rdinary people still hope, suspect, and believe they can be Jesus." She continues:

"The formulas of religion may be so overfamiliar that many believers have a hard time acting as if this most surprising narrative is true. They may doubt themselves, and not understand why Jesus trusts us to do his work. They may be sick to death of the *institution*, [of the] church."... "They may, like me, be anxious because there's no way to be Jesus on your own private terms: you have to jump in and do it alongside [all of Jesus' other weirdo disciples].

"But Jesus is real, and so, praise God, are we. Every single thing the resurrected Jesus does on earth, he does through our bodies. You're fed, you're healed, you're forgiven, you're pronounced clean. You are loved, and you are raised from the dead.

"Go and do likewise."³ Amen.

³Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak: Feeding, Healing, Raising the Dead*, pp. 165-166.