

Texts: Exodus 9:2-8a; Psalm 100; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8

Jesus makes it look so easy, doesn't he? He goes to all the cities and villages. He teaches in all the synagogues. He cures every disease and every sickness. Jesus gets it done. Wouldn't you follow a guy like that? Wouldn't you want to be part of his entourage? All that healing, all that preaching, all those crowds, all that success?

Ah, but then...The going gets a little tougher.

Because the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Twelve to be exact. Twelve disciples. And we actually know their names: Simon, also known as Peter, his brother Andrew, and another pair of brothers, James and John. Phillip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew. A second James and a second Simon, and Thaddeus and Judas. We know the occupations of at least some of this group: the brothers Simon and Andrew, and James and John had been fishermen. Matthew had been a tax collector. The other Simon is called "the Cananaean" but we know him better as Simon the Zealot, who wanted to mount armed insurrection against Rome. We know a few of these men by who their fathers were: the brothers James and John were the sons of Zebedee; the other James was the son of Alphaeus. Finally there is Judas Iscariot, who will always be named and remembered as Jesus' betrayer.

This is what I love about the gospel stories – they are so specific. Jesus' disciples weren't some anonymous group. They were twelve individual men, with names and backgrounds, families and occupations.

So when Jesus sends this group of individuals out on their first mission trip, his instructions are specific as well: Proclaim the good news of the kingdom. Cure the sick,

raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” Clear and specific instructions for what it is that disciples do.

Beginning today and over the course of the summer we are going to read Matthew’s gospel and consider what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Because there are times when we think that we don’t actually have to do what Jesus did. That we can’t possibly do what Jesus did.

So this morning, let’s think about what Jesus did:

The gospel reading this morning comes from the 9th and 10th chapters of Matthew. Let’s review the story up to now. The first two chapters of Matthew tell about Jesus’ birth. Chapter 3 focuses on the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus’ baptism. In chapter 4, Jesus is tempted by the devil in the wilderness, and after 40 days, he begins his ministry. And here is what Matthew 4:23 says: “He went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.” Compare that to Matthew 9:35, the very first sentence of the gospel printed on the back of your bulletin. The words are virtually the same: Jesus went about, teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the good news, and curing every disease and every sickness. Jesus’s work, at the beginning of the gospel, here in the middle and at the end, is to heal people and to free them.

Let’s continue through Matthew’s gospel. Chapters 5,6, and 7 are an extended message about the good news of the kingdom. We call those chapters the Sermon on the Mount. In it, Jesus blesses those who are on the bottom of the heap, those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who are persecuted. He reinterprets the laws of Moses to be inclusive rather than exclusive. He teaches his audience to pray,

calling God “Abba” – Father, daddy, actually. He instructs them to be generous, not to save up treasure on earth. He instructs them not to worry about eat or wear, because God takes care of even the smallest bird and dresses the lilies of the field. He instructs them to love one another, and to extend that love outward, even to those who we would prefer to hate, our enemies.

I think it is highly likely that as Jesus traveled through Galilee, he continued to preach this sermon in all the synagogues. Just as he continued to heal people. In chapters 8 and 9 we read that he cleansed a leper by touching him, healed a Roman centurion’s servant, healed Peter’s mother-in-law, cast out a legion of demons, healed a woman who touched the hem of his cloak and brought a 12-year old girl back to life when everyone thought she was dead.

Proclaim the good news of the kingdom.

Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.

Could you? Could you do it? Follow Jesus into those places of the lost and abandoned, the sick and the dead? Because that is what it takes. That is what he calls us to do – heal and to make free. Healing and liberation. Jesus asks no more and no less of his disciples than he himself has done.

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. But here you are, disciples. Just like those first twelve, you have a name and a background, a family and an occupation. You have a specific job to do. Jesus has called you to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, to heal and liberate. Jesus sends you, just like he sent those first twelve, out beyond the doors of this church, out to the world that he loves, out to find the lost sheep, out to gather in the harvest.

There are sick people out there. Folks who need a word of encouragement, perhaps someone just to sit for a while and share the burden. There are dead people out there. People whose spirits have been killed by addiction, or violence or poverty. There are lepers out there. People who have been abandoned because they are old or shut in or poor. There are people out there who are possessed by demons. The demons of mental illness, of shame, of hopelessness.

Jesus never said it would be easy. But he also promises us that he will be with us as we go into the harvest field. That harvest field that lies directly on the other side of these walls. Jesus feeds us so that we can feed others. Jesus forgives us so that we can forgive others. Jesus heals our wounds, body and soul, so that we can care for others. And Jesus sends us out so that we can experience the hospitality of others.

One last detail from this gospel reading: Jesus gave those twelve disciples the authority to do what he did: to offer healing and liberation. And just like them, Jesus has given you the authority to do it too. In your baptism, you have been given the Holy Spirit, the spirit of the advocate, spirit of the comforter, the spirit of compassion for all who are harassed and helpless. The spirit that enables you to speak God's word of promise, to tell the good news of the kingdom.

So go. Go out the door into your mission field. Go out the door and live as a disciple. Jesus' instructions are specific: Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Heal them and set them free. And tell everyone you meet the good news: the kingdom of heaven has come near.