

Hespeler, 14 June, 2020 © Scott McAndless

Exodus 19:2-8, Psalm 100, Romans 5:1-8, Matthew 9:35-10:23

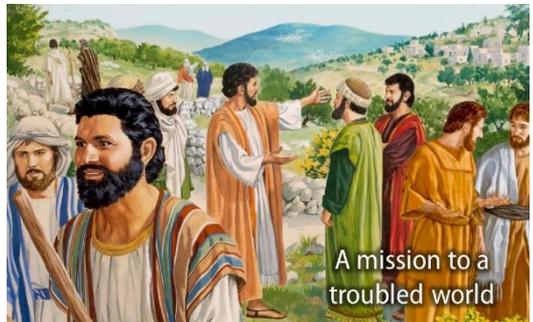
The world just does not seem to be doing very well lately. There are too many reasons. We are not just dealing with a pandemic, which was honestly horrific to begin with, but we are also just beginning to come to terms with what the long-term impact of that crisis may be. Businesses are shutting down and may not reopen. Jobs – maybe whole sectors of employment – are disappearing perhaps never to return. We are all seeing just how fragile the security that we all once took for granted really is. People are wondering what sort of life might be there for them when this is all over and how they might be able to make a living.

Things have also kind of just fallen apart in the United States where the racism that has always been there has been exposed in its ongoing brutality. We have seen what black people face day in and day out and how they have to deal with fear, violence and systemic persecution. They have stood up and forcefully demanded change but have been met with intensified violence. All is clearly not well there.

The world is not in a good place. And my question is what do we, as people of faith, need to be doing about that. I am the first to confess that we don't have all of the answers. We are not in a position to implement policies and, even if we were, we may not even know what needs to be done to make things better. But surely, this is not a time to do nothing. Surely people of faith need to be using that faith to reach out and to make a difference. But how can we do that?

I am struck by some of the connections between the times that we are now living in and the situation that was faced by Jesus and his disciples in the early first century of the common era. Galilee in the time of Jesus, to put it bluntly, was a bit of a mess. They were not dealing with a pandemic and, as far as we can tell, racial tension was not a problem at all in the first century. There is no evidence of anyone being treated differently because of the colour of their skin. So the causes were not the same, but some of the effects they were dealing with are eerily similar.

There was economic devastation. The policies of King Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee, were pushing people into great economic hardship. People were losing their family farms and properties as the taxes and debts were piled on top of them. Fisherman on the Sea of Galilee could no longer make ends meet as they dealt with Herod's ever-increasing demands as he appropriated more and more of the fish that they caught. There is a reason why so many fishermen were willing to give up their nets and walk away from the job that they had always done in order to



follow Jesus. The lives that they had always known were no longer sustainable.

As a result of these and many other problems, the people of Galilee were living with some devastating consequences. Many people were stricken with what they called demon possession. Now, we probably wouldn't call it by that name today. We would probably call it depression, addiction, malnutrition and people acting out in ways that were dangerous to themselves or to others. All of those kinds of ailments they tended to put in the category of demon possession because that was simply how they understood such things. They even had severe cases where individuals were so devastated by these so-called spiritual ailments that they were literally paralyzed or blinded as a result.

Of course, problems like those are still very much with us today and the indications are that recent crises have only made all of them much worse. We don't call such things demon possession today and there are some very good reasons why we don't do that, but we are dealing with many of the same kinds of problems that plagued the Galilean countryside in Jesus' day.

We are told in our reading this morning that Jesus sent his twelve disciples out into a countryside that was dealing with all of that and more. What was the point of sending his people out at such a time? They were clearly not going to change the political or economic policies of King Herod. They weren't going to just fix everything that was wrong with the country. So, what were they supposed to do? I'd really like to get the answer to that question because it might provide us with a way to respond to the very real struggles that our world is dealing with right now.

So let's take a good look at the instructions that Jesus gave to his disciples as he sent them out. The first thing that I think we need to note is that he sent them *out*. You do realize, I hope, that that is not actually the model of ministry that we have had in the church for centuries now. The model we've had in the life of the church is that we bring all of those people in our society who are struggling for various reasons *in*. We bring them in and preach at them. We bring them in and try and solve their problems with the various programs of the church.

Of course, we are in a time now where that model, all of a sudden, simply doesn't work because we cannot bring anyone into our building. So maybe this would indeed be a very good time to explore Jesus' approach in this passage. The church is actually at its best when we stop demanding that people change and fit what we want them to be so that they can come in and join us and instead we simply go out and meet people where they are in the midst of the struggles of their lives.

But that leads us to the next question. What is it that we actually have to offer to the people we meet, the people who are struggling with various things in the world right now? Well, this is what Jesus says to the disciples, "**As you go, proclaim the good news.**" And there is certainly no doubt that people are in great need of some good news at the moment. And Jesus is very clear about

what that good news is. They are to proclaim that, **“The kingdom of heaven has come near.”**

What do people whose world doesn't seem to be doing very well need to hear? I think that Jesus really hits the nail right on the head with this one. When the system of this world is falling apart – when we've gotten to the place where it is quite plain that the system is not serving the people, the good news that people need to hear is that there is another way. Whenever Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God he was putting forth this promise that there was another way of doing things, that the world could be different. And I believe that that is a message we need to be willing to share today as well.

If we are only going out and giving the impression that nothing in this world needs to change and that people only need to put their trust in Jesus for their own personal salvation, we are not proclaiming the same gospel that Jesus gave his disciples to share. The vision of the kingdom of God that he held up is never easy and is never going to come without some trouble, but it is still the best good news that we can possibly offer to the world.

As Jesus sent his disciples out, though, he didn't just give them something to say. He also gave them something to do. **“Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.”** I know how that part of Jesus' marching orders might sound. That makes it sound as if we're supposed to go out and perform impossible miracles for the people that we meet. If that is what it is, then I think that most of us would rightly say that that is something outside of our skill set.

But you need to understand this part of the mission in the terms the people would have understood it in Jesus' day. Remember that people understood almost anything that went bad in someone's life in almost exclusively spiritual terms. As the people of Jesus' world were beaten down by poverty, social exclusion and hopelessness, these things manifested themselves in what they saw as spiritual ailments and demon possession, but that we might understand as mental illness, malnutrition, skin conditions, anger and apathy.

Yes, it appears that some of the people that Jesus sent out performed signs and wonders and brought about miraculous healings, but I am not convinced that that was the main point of what he was telling them to do. What he was saying to them was that they should meet these people where they were, that they should understand with empathy the struggles that they were having that were literally making them sick.

The healing that Jesus was sending his disciples out to do was all about ministering to the whole person and giving to people a sense of their own dignity and power and above all giving them a reason to hope. And, my friends, that is a kind of healing that we can all be involved in. It doesn't replace the extraordinary work done by medical professionals, of course, but it is a necessary kind of healing that is very much needed. When you stand up against the injustices of this world, when you demand that opportunities be given to those trapped in poverty or excluded because they belong to minority groups,

when you oppose the evils of this world including systemic prejudice and racism, you are engaged in the type of mission that Jesus was sending his disciples out to be involved in.

There is so much to be found in these marching orders that Jesus gave to his disciples as they went out. I cannot cover all of the implications, but there is another one that I feel like I need to highlight at this particular moment in time. A very big question we need to consider in the midst of our present challenges is how do we deal with opposition. What should our response be when people are simply uninterested in what we may have to say or even openly hostile? Jesus does not fail to prepare his disciples for this possibility.

“Whatever town or village you enter,” he says, **“find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.”** This makes it clear what our attitude should be. We should be determined to be peaceful, not to force our way and certainly not to force people to listen to us. We must respect other people’s thoughts and ideas. By being worthy people and seeking the worthiness of others, Jesus suggests, we will find people who are a blessing to us and to whom we can be a blessing.

Jesus’ advice for dealing with apathy or opposition might require a little bit of explanation. **“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.”** Us taking off our shoes and shaking off the dust wouldn’t mean anything to ourselves or to others today, though I suppose it might get us a laugh because it would just be such bizarre behaviour. But, of course, this was an action that did have meaning to people in Jesus’ time. It was an action that would commonly be carried out by observant Jews when they left a town or city that was under Gentile control. It was basically a way for a Jew to say, “I’ll do me, and you do you. I’m not going to hold any baggage from our interaction. I will move on from here and respect you for who you are.” And, if that is the attitude that Jesus would like us to bring to any less-than-ideal interactions, I think that is the way that we should go.

But we should go. The world is not at its best these days. People are struggling. I know that the limitations placed upon us because of this pandemic make it all much more complicated than ever, but we do have a message that can help and can make a difference. I believe that, if we go through our lives with an openness to the opportunities that God places before us, we will have the chance to bring healing, hope and possibility in difficult times.