

Matthew 9:35—10:8-23, NRSV, emended

[After healing a number of people] 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 illness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless—like sheep without a shepherd. Then Jesus said to the disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into God's harvest."

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. 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; ³Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot—the one who betrayed Jesus.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go anywhere among the Gentiles, and do not enter any Samaritan towns, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with leprosy, cast out demons. You have received without having to pay; give without asking payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, 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. 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. 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.

"Understand, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues. You will be dragged before governors and kings because of me. This will be a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say. What you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 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."

In David Lose's article on this week's gospel, he leads with these words: "Where do we start?" This is a question that I have asked myself ever since I started college in the fall of 1976 and became aware that there are things "going on" in the world, things that are profoundly not right. One of the dynamics that lead to me failing 13 classes at St. Olaf before finally (finally!) graduating is the experience of feeling completely overwhelmed by the tremendous injustice that is found in the very foundations of so many human systems. And what could I possibly do about all of that??

Well, we can start with the gospel where Jesus warns them that they are going out as sheep in the midst of wolves. And who are these wolves? The Edomites and Samaritans? The Egyptians or the Babylonians? No. They are being sent to their own people. They are the wolves.

Or we can start with the fact that these twelve "apostles" are named. And they are quite a motley crew. The first will deny him, the last will betray him and in between are those who have worked for the Roman oppressors and those who struggled to believe. There are literally millions of others through the centuries who have done as the apostles did, but these twelve are named and we remember them to this day. Because they are named. It is still important that we name people now. David Lose writes,

Since 2014, when Michael's Brown's death at the hands of white police officers provoked an outcry for reform, the levels of similar deaths have stayed constant, hovering between 1000-1200 every year. No decline. None. Of late, we have been implored to, like Matthew, say the names: George Floyd, Sean Monterrosa, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner. We don't know much about most of these folks. They are certainly not alone. But saying their names keeps their memory before us.

There are other places we could start. Like when Jesus looks at the crowds. David Lose again:

Or do we start with the crowds, hungry and sick, harassed and helpless. Matthew doesn't tell us that in the face of their overwhelming need, distress, and demands, Jesus implored the disciples to clear the square, called for crowd control, or scuttled off to safety. Rather, Matthew writes simply and tellingly, "he had compassion for them."

Or we could start with the fact that I'd like things to get back to normal. I miss my old life. It wasn't perfect but it seemed bigger and I knew how to live in that world. To this, Richard Swanson, a Lutheran pastor and a professor at Augustana University writes:

I am not wishing for a return to some imagined "golden age" when everybody just got along. There was no such age, not in the dim past, not three weeks ago, though those of us in the dominant majority culture sometimes find ourselves wishing we could just "go on with our lives."

While this is all understandable, I have to realize that I think and feel such things from a place of great privilege. As a white, straight, well-educated male, the system – the world as it was – worked pretty well for me. It is not so for many others. This desire of mine flies in the face of the needs of others. Again, Richard Swanson:

But of course 'going on with our lives' is impossible for people who have to teach their children how not to be attacked by police officers. That's, like, the point.

I taught my children to respect the law and the police. I realized that there are always a few “bad apples” but that they were rare and that the police work *for us*. It's different when you are anything but white in this country and it has been that way for a long, long time.

We see and hear anger in the face of our black and brown siblings, and rightfully so. They have been done wrong in systemic ways their entire lives. The system does not work nearly so well for them as it does for me. As Swanson puts it:

... no one should ask for an end to anger from people who look at their children and have to wonder if they will be the next Ahmaud Arbery, the next Breonna Taylor, the next George Floyd. The list goes on, and history gives us no reason to believe that it will stop. No one should ask for an end for anger until there is an end to privileged self-interest that calls for quiet, promises to do better, and then forgets about all of it and gets on with its life.

Swanson goes on to point out that

Jewish thought looks at the world and sees that it is upside-down, and out of that recognition came the notion that God would send messiah to correct what was deeply wrong. That means that the message Jesus commits to his followers has its roots in the fear and anger that go with living in a system that runs on injustice. The message takes its energy from people who have learned that, while it may be the case that the large majority of police are well-intentioned and trustworthy, there is little you can do when the force closes ranks to protect another rogue officer who is rightly charged with murder. And when the police force itself precipitates violence (and there are credible reports of this in every decade of my life, and of my father's life), there is little anyone can do. Or hope for.

Jesus gives his apostles a different message, and this message, as Swanson puts it, is that:

the time of abuse, brutality, and casual injustice is over. This message is not well-received by privileged people in positions of power. Governors and kings will accuse such messengers of treason and terrorism. I do not mean to pretend that there are not traitors or terrorists in the world. I just mean to point out that governors and kings find terrorism to be indistinguishable from opposition.

We are the privileged, we are the powerful, and it is we who have to change. Our desire to have things go “back to normal” work against the faith we claim and the work God has given us to do. We are called to work for the coming reign of Christ, the work of turning the world right-side up. We believe that the promise of this reign is so strong that we can

actually live **right now** as if it is already here. So let us not go back to “normal.” As Richard Swanson points out:

Those impulses within us that just want it all to calm down so we can go back to our lives put us on the side of the governors and kings. That is worth thinking about slowly.

We rightfully feel a healthy sense of patriotism and pride when we recall the words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” until we realize that when it says “all men,” it literally meant “white, landowning men.” We like to hear it as an all-inclusive statement, but it was not understood that way by those who wrote it. But the promise is still hidden therein, and we continue to fall far short of that ideal. And we have to do better.

But where do we start? The amount of work to be done and the resistance to the changes that need to take place can be so overwhelming. Here is Swanson’s admonition:

This is a moment to listen to people who have been afraid for far too long. This is a moment to pray and work for the world to be turned right-side-up. This is a moment to realize that things are going to change because they have to change. This is a moment to listen for messiah. Especially from voices that you have never listened to before.

Throughout Holy Scripture there are those who cry out to the Lord from their place of suffering and helplessness. In Exodus we read that,

The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. ²⁴ God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵ God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

The very least we can do is “take notice” of those who cry out today.

In Matthew we read of Herod when the “wise men” came to him looking for the one who had been born king of the Jews. The Magi had been warned in a dream to not tell Herod where the baby was, and returned home by another way. Then we hear of Herod’s reaction.

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.

Right after which we are told,

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

*“A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”*

The voice of Rachel can be heard from the mothers of those who have been murdered by law enforcement and a judicial system that so regularly fails them. They will not and cannot be consoled, because their children are no more. God hears their cries; the very least we can do is listen to them as well. That's where we need to start.

In so doing we will hear things that we do not want to hear about ourselves. It will be an uncomfortable and sometimes painful process. But unless we understand what they are going through and until we understand and repent of the ways we have contributed to their suffering, nothing will change.

As the apostles were sent, so have we been sent, and the work is still the same:

As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.

The kingdom of heaven has come near. Let us proclaim repentance and forgiveness in Jesus' name and carry out the ministry of reconciliation that Christ has entrusted us with. It is the time to repent, my dear friends, and to bear the fruit that befits repentance.

Amen.