

“Good news! Stay Tuned!”

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Matt 9:35-10:8

35 Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on 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 workers are few. 38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

10:1 He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

2 These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; 3 Phillip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; 4 Simon the zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or any town of the Samaritans. 6 Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.

7 As you go, preach this message, ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’ 8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.

So, our scripture is set in the region of Galilee and it says that Jesus went to all the towns and villages, healing the sick, casting out demons and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.

How many of you golfers can remember the first time you tried to swing a club at a ball with the true intention of hitting it? Awkward, wasn't it?

Then you watched a pro do it and he/she made it look so easy! Jesus went into all these towns and villages and he made it look SO easy. Now he is telling his disciples to do the same.

By saying 'good news' the author of Matthew assumes that you know what he is talking about. If you lived back in those days, what would be considered good news? Same as today. That is, the Kingdom of Heaven, God's Kingdom, has arrived. God's Kingdom, with all the compassion, love, harmony, peace and joy is here and Christ is showing us how to live in it. He was the walking, breathing example of it.

The recipients of this gospel are said to be Greek-speaking Jews, so they had a historical background different from ours. There had been OT prophecies of a coming kingdom. Isaiah, for instance; Isaiah and all the other prophets kept telling the nation of Israel that something was in the making, something in the future; a warning, announcement, a joyous proclamation.

This was their background, their heritage, their bedtime stories. But, I sometimes wonder how much emphasis they put on such history. What about you? Do you wake up each morning thinking about George Washington and Valley Forge? I doubt it. We certainly know of it, but it is not at the top of our list of things that governs how we consciously behave in a day-to-day fashion. After all, that was almost 250 years ago.

Well, Abraham died about 2000 years before Jesus was born. And the prophets lived around 700 years before Jesus. So, here they are with this faded and worn-out ancient heritage, no real self-governing structure in place, and living in subject to a foreign power from a place called Rome.

So, what did they really have to give them a quick identity of themselves? Not much. They were kind of a lost people. The scripture calls them 'sheep without a shepherd.' This is OT wording to indicate

they had no prophet and no king to look after them and show them the way.

But there were a few learned people who remembered the prophets and had hope. For instance, there was a man named Joseph of Arimathea who donated his tomb for the body of Jesus. He was a prominent member of the council who, according to Mark's gospel, was, "Waiting for the kingdom of God." Matthew describes him as a follower of Jesus. So, the society we are reading about was probably a mixture of those who were fully conscious of the prophets, those who had only heard about them, and those who really could not care less. Sounds a little like us, doesn't it?

And Jesus is bringing that ancient thought process back to the surface again. Buried and forgotten by the passage of time and multiple layers of laws and rules, the real message was still alive. It was a message of hope, love, and peace. And the fact that many people did listen to Jesus suggests that they did realize that something was missing.

Word traveled fast back in those days, and they didn't even have the internet! Our scripture says he went to many villages and towns. And he looked out upon the crowds of people – and had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, meaning that they had no one to give them direction and purpose.

So, he tells his disciples that the harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few. He urges them to pray for help to come to these people.

And they became the answer to their own prayer.

The disciples were an odd mixture of people. They were all ordinary men, but of diverse lifestyles. For instance, Matthew was a tax collector. His loyalty, before he met Jesus, was to Rome. That was his paycheck. Then there was Simon the zealot, who was just the opposite. He was a

fierce Jewish nationalist who would not tolerate allegiance to foreign power. Had these two met in a dark alley before Jesus came along, the outcome might have been bloody.

Can you think of a modern day equivalent of such opposites? Turn on the news!

But, back to the towns and villages: How often do we see people in some sort of need and we hope that someone will come and help them? I am talking about both material and spiritual needs. And in our scripture lesson, it is not isolated individuals, but whole villages. Crowds, it says. People hungry for hope, leadership, direction, inspiration.

For Jesus, it started with compassion and his compassion led him to see their needs. So, we must train ourselves to be looking. Sometimes, material needs must be met first. Preaching the good news of the kingdom is not always done with words. William Booth, founder of Salvation Army, once said it is hard to speak to someone's heart when their feet are freezing. Our compassion should show the face of Christ, because that is where our authority comes from. We are instruments of God's grace.

So, why did he tell them to go only to the "Lost sheep of the house of Israel"? This is in stark contrast to the Great Commission we talked about last week in which he sent his disciples out into the whole world. For one thing, in today's scripture, going to Gentiles and Samaritans would present unique social barriers and these disciples were new at this, so starting with the House of Israel would give them opportunity to spread the good news without having to be part of the diplomatic corps as well. Secondly, and probably most important, was the fact that the Jews were God's chosen people and they were intended to be a light unto the world. The message of salvation was to start with them. They could do this without having to explain OT prophecies. And remember, the disciples only had a portion of the story. The death and resurrection of our Lord had not happened yet.

But, Jesus pulls no punches. Reading beyond our scripture today, he gives them the cold hard truth that they will encounter resistance and even persecution. Jesus knew what the full message would be when his ministry reached its pinnacle and he knew the message would sound revolutionary. Armed with only a fundamental portion of the message, the disciples would be walking into a potential feeding frenzy. Those truly hungry for God's Word would listen and learn, but those who would oppose and try to disrupt the message would do so because they had personal interests they wanted to protect. That kind opposition could be dangerous.

What makes someone go forward into the jaws of danger? What motivation is at the other end? I had a great uncle who was a WW1 veteran. He was an infantryman with the First Division, some know it as the 'Big Red 1.' Uncle John's primary duty was that of a courier and his vehicle was a Harley Davidson motorcycle. I have seen pictures of such models and they look quite smaller than the ones we see today. Uncle John was given a vital message to be delivered to an American unit that was advancing on an unsuspecting German unit, but in his way was a deep gorge that was quite wide and miles long. The American unit he had to reach was on the other side. Spanning this gorge was a railroad trestle. A local Frenchman told him that no trains were scheduled for several hours, so he walked his motorcycle across the chasm as the wheels went bump, bump on the cross ties. The written message he carried was telling the American unit to stop their advance because the armistice had been signed. The war was over. His actions saved many lives on both sides. He lived to a ripe old age and I didn't hear of this story until after he had passed away. I asked older members of my family if he had mentioned being the least bit scared crossing on the trestle. He had seen the horrors of trench warfare and they told me the news he carried was so good, he could not think about being scared.

If you truly believe the good news of the kingdom is great news, fear from any level of persecution takes a back seat.

We often speak about the unchurched from this pulpit. We humans are relational creatures in search of meaning and what a lost feeling it must be for the unchurched to look in all the wrong places for the answers that only God can supply. Has the need really changed that much in the last 2000 years? But beyond having our own spiritual needs, do we think outside of ourselves long enough to see the same need in others?

For Jesus, the good news was that transformation can be had right now. We can live with God today! We can rid ourselves of the burdensome tasks of self-focusing and instead take on a life of compassion, love and mercy. Will that get you into heaven? I will not say it won't, but I will quickly remind you that N.T. Wright said Christianity is about more than just getting into heaven. If that's all it was, then all our deeds, great and magnificent as they may appear, would be centered on a personal prize. And we could not truthfully say we had put away selfish desires. We should see the face of Christ in ourselves and in every person around us, from homeless bag lady, to glamorous movie stars to helpless babies.

Unfortunately, there are people and congregations who regard themselves as unable or non-qualified to carry out Jesus' ministry. Throughout history, seemingly impossible and amazing things have been carried out by ordinary people in the church.

As we walk out into the world with the joy of Christ in our hearts, we will encounter persecution. In this country, it will not be physical abuse and pain as we hear about in parts of Asia, Africa, or the Middle East. But it will be there. People will challenge you, reject you, say all manner of ill-will about you because of what you proclaim. In the third chapter of 1 Peter, we are told to have our answers ready, should anyone ask us. The best way to be prepared is to know where your faith lies; not what you have memorized but what you really live with. Your enthusiasm must be sincere and totally visible, like a reformed former cigarette smoker or a recent new Volkswagen owner. If you want to hear sheer joy, talk to one of those folks. When you ask them the why and wherefores of their new life, they will tell you, rest assured.

It amounts to the difference between belief and faith. If I stand at the foot of a bridge, I tell myself that I believe the bridge will support me. I have seen the engineering calculations and watched the assembly of the materials. But I have faith when I take that first step onto the bridge. Faith is trust in action. Faith in God means you have invested time in thinking about what you believe. It means you have had doubts and you stayed in there – in the fight – and now you have your answers and those answers guide you. Do not think for one minute that God does not realize the difficulties you have gone through. We are tasked to go into an arena that could easily have negative outcomes. When you live what you believe, it is because you have faith – and it will not go unnoticed.

Mere talk is cheap. I remind myself of that every time I step into this pulpit. We must show Christianity in action. Action speaks volumes and you will know when that action is called for. People who see you, almost without exception, will wonder what motivates you. What made you cross that railroad trestle?

When we take action as part of the good news and someone asks why we did it, what will we say? Do we use that ageless, safe, benign-sounding answer, “Oh, it’s the right thing to do”? Or will we step out of the mainstream and say, “This is what I believe God wants me to do”?

Will you feel obliged to apologize first before responding or will your response just roll off your tongue just like asking someone to please pass the butter while seated at the dinner table? When the butter is just out of your reach, there is no doubt, no need for defense, no explanation required. You simply say, with all confidence and gentle tone, “Please pass the butter.” And you say it with full faith in what you say. Can you, with that same confidence, say, “I saw the need and felt God calling me to act”? Can we say that?

Your faith must be a first-hand discovery, not a second hand story or a colorful anecdote. We must go through a process of thinking out our

faith so we know how to explain the good news that says we are not harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

So, how good is your good news? Good enough to stick your neck out a bit? Good enough to make people wonder about the source of your joy?

Amen.