

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 9:35-10:10

Pew Bible, N.T. pg. 9

³⁵ Then 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 every sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for 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 laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” ^{10:1} 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. ² 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; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Cananaean and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. ⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not take a road leading to gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, ⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷ As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ ⁸ Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. ⁹ Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, ¹⁰ no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff, for laborers deserve their food.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 9:35-10:10

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Proclaim the Good News As You Go...

Pastor Amy Terhune

I’m going to read you a post from Facebook. I don’t know who originally posted it, and I have no idea if it’s factually accurate, but a colleague shared it, and I hear truth in it:

“I own a small bakery. Business has been slow. Rent is up. I was thinking about closing. Last Monday, a teenager came in. He looked nervous. He counted out change for a cookie. He was short about \$0.50. “It’s okay,” I told him, “take it.” He ate it at a table, looking at his math homework. He looked stuck, and I used to be a math tutor, so I walked over. “Quadratic equations?” He nodded. “I don’t get it,” he said. I sat down and helped him for 20 minutes. He got it. He left smiling. The next day, he came back with two friends. They bought cookies. The day after that, 5 kids came. Apparently, he told the school, “the lady at the bakery helps with homework.” Now my bakery is the after-school hang-out spot. It’s loud. It’s messy. There are backpacks everywhere. Yesterday, I found a note in the tip jar. It was wrapped around the \$20 bill. It said, “Thanks for helping my son pass math – sincerely, a mom.” I’m not closing the bakery. I think I finally found my purpose. It’s not cookies. It’s community.”

Now, as I said, I don’t know if that’s factual. I don’t know what may become of that bakery. But she’s not wrong. Community is a worthwhile purpose. And what makes community, builds community, sustains community is recognizing the inherent value and humanity in others. Communities thrive when members within them know they matter.

Centuries ago, when Jesus set out to share the Word of God with the world, he didn’t do it by himself. He did it by building community. The scripture this morning tells us that as he went around teaching and healing, he had compassion. He recognized that people were harassed and helpless – at

least, that's how Matthew puts it – and his heart went out to them. Think about that expression – harassed and helpless. In other words, harried, stressed out, careworn, bullied, under duress, beleaguered, without any sense of how to change things, or be proactive to improve their situation. I know people in those circumstances. Heck, I've been in those circumstances. Stress and anxiety can leave us so wound up that it's hard to recognize that God gives us agency and power to act, to change, to heal. I might still be stuck had it not been for community – for friends, colleagues, and loved ones who served as Christ to me in those bleak times.

Our lesson this morning is about evangelism, but whenever I use that word, I know it makes some folks very uncomfortable. For better or worse, evangelism has come to be associated with people who are pushy and often judgmental. Many in the world today are more inclined to link evangelism with politics than with the church, which, frankly, is troubling. If you go back, though, and really look at the word – at what it actually means from the ancient Greek and Latin, it simply means “good message” or “good news”. It's one person connecting with another to tell them something that helps.

If we are going to be effective in reaching people for Christ, we are going to have to start showing people that we really care. As one commentator noted, evangelism and missions must be relational in nature. There is no record of Jesus walking up to someone out the clear blue sky and saying: I am the Messiah, and then him beginning to show his care for them. No, throughout scripture, without exception, Jesus showed his care for others first, and then he revealed himself to them. Compassion was always where Jesus started.

But as we said, he didn't do that work alone. He did it community. Jesus shared good news. And he called others to join him in that work. Then He sent those disciples out to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is near. They're sent to cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with disease; and cast out demons. Let me tell you what that means in today's language.

To cure the sick is to be an agent of healing. And there's all different kinds of healing that we may be about.

To raise the dead is to be a channel of God's resurrecting, life-giving power. There's a million ways to be life-giving in this world.

To cleanse disease is to help people start over. It's the gift of grace, of repentance, renewal, revival. Our world needs less judgement and more grace to thrive.

And to cast out demons is to give hope, to open doors, to release from captivity. Hope is precious and too scarce these days.

To proclaim the Kingdom of God is near, is to announce, not only with our voices, but with our giving, our voting, our work, and our action, that the world God intends for humankind – a just world, a peaceful world, an equitable world, a moral world, a kind and compassion world where all have opportunities to live into the fullness of the human experience – this world is possible and is worth sacrificing to build. It's to partner with God in transforming and reshaping our world until it resembles heaven on earth. But it starts with faith – a belief in God's goodness; a belief that a new world is possible and is what God wants for us. Too many people have grown resigned and cynical about the state of our world. And there are powers invested in making sure we stay that way. But God calls us to believe in God's vision. With God, all things are possible, but in order to be part of the work, it's really helpful if you trust that God can do what we can't.

At conference two weekends ago, our guest teacher was Dr. Ashley Boggan. She is the General Secretary of the General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church. And she tells about the early ministry of John Wesley. After his heart was strangely warmed on May 24, 1738, he realized that faith has to warm the heart – it can't just live in the head. And he realized that faith is

experienced, not just inherited. It's experienced in community – in relationships with other people – those looking for healing, for life-giving purpose, for renewal, for hope.

She writes about how Wesley began to talk about the experience of faith, and others around him thought he was too emotional, too passionate, too demonstrative. To us, we think, of course faith is an experience! I mean, duh! But in Wesley's day, faith was an intellectual exercise. Faith was for the elite, the well-educated, the respectable. The rabble had no place in the church. But when faith becomes an experience of God's grace in the heart, then anyone can know it. And as he preaches more passionately, Wesley finds himself turned out of churches for being too ecstatic – that's the word they use and it's a grave insult in the 1730s. So, at the invitation of George Whitefield, who was a member of their Oxford Holy Club once upon a blue moon, Wesley travels to Bristol, where Whitefield is ministering. Now Bristol, at the time, was ground zero in England's industrial revolution. Factories are just starting to pop up, and they're attracting workers from the countryside – men, women, and children – and the populations of these little towns is starting to swell. The infrastructure can't support it, there's crime, there's disease, they're living in tenement housing on top of one another, and not a one of them is welcome at the local Anglican church. I mean, good gracious, you can't go in God's house wearing patched clothes, with dirt under your nails, smelling like body odor and filth. You can beg outside for alms, but you can't go in. So, Whitefield starts preaching to them outside. Listen to what Wesley writes in his journal about that moment in history:

Saturday, March 31, 1739: In the evening, I reached Bristol and met Mr. Whitefield there. I could scarce reconcile myself at first to his strange way of preaching in the fields... having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order that I should have thought the saving of souls of sin if it had not been done inside the church.

Sunday, April 1, 1739: In the evening (Mr. Whitefield being gone) I began expounding our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, (one pretty remarkable precedent to field preaching...) to a little society which was accustomed to meet once or twice a week in Nicholas Street.

Monday, April 2, 1739: At Four o'clock in the afternoon I submitted to be more vile and preaching the glad tidings of salvation from a little eminence in the ground adjoining to the city to about three thousand people.

Boggan picks up on that phrase from Wesley: I submitted to be more vile. By submission, Wesley means obedience to God. And by Vile, Wesley undoubtedly means that he is preaching in a less than savory place to less than savory people and meeting with less than approval or sanction from his Bishop or anyone else of rapport. But he does it anyway, because the Spirit compels him. And the Methodist movement spreads like wildfire. He organizes these people who've never known anything real from the church before into societies, congregations, community. He tells them what Jesus tells us: the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. Wesley doesn't just touch hearts and save souls. He organizes for mission and ministry to the least, the lost, and the lonely. His people teach the children, care for the sick, bail the debtors out of prison, help factory workers find meaning and purpose, feed the hungry, and co-orchestrate a movement to end slavery under the leadership of William Wilberforce and others. This movement is Spirit-fueled, and it takes hold.

Fast forward fifty years, from 1739 to 1789. John Wesley is now an old man. The methodist movement has flourished – there are 72,000 methodists in England by that time, and another 50,000 in the American Colonies, and that's growing every day. But still, 72,000 methodists are about 2% of the British Population at that time. Which doesn't seem like much. But remember. 2% of the US population today is Jewish. 2% are Mormon. 2% have a doctoral degree in American today. 2% doesn't sound like much, but it's enough that people know who they are. They've heard of them. They know somebody. Does 2% matter? Well, Dr. David Hempton thinks so. He is the Alonzo L. McDonald

Professor of Evangelical Theological Studies at Harvard Divinity School. He's also one of the Premier Scholars of Methodism teaching in the world today, and in his book, *"Methodism and Politics in British Society 1750-1850"*, he takes a look at 1789. On March 4, 1789, in the United States, the Constitution was ratified and became the law of the land. Later that Spring, in France, growing disparity between the rich and poor and severe financial crisis burst into violent and bloody revolution. Madame Guillotine robbed every man, woman, and child with an ounce of noble blood of their head in France. Hempton asks, "Why didn't that happen in England?" and he argues that it's at least partially because an itinerate preacher and his band of followers submitted to be more vile, and had spent the previous 50 years proclaiming the love and grace of Jesus Christ, addressing the disparity between the rich and the poor, preaching to the poor about their worth, their agency, their potential in God's service, banding them together in societies and congregations that could lift up and empower them together. You can't argue that a lack of Methodists in France caused the revolution. But you can argue that the presence of Methodists and other Dissenters of similar veins in England stayed off bloody revolution there.

Why am I telling you this? Because it's our legacy and our calling. Evangelism isn't just preaching God's love and grace and hoping people go to heaven. Evangelism is living the faith as you go. Jesus sent his disciples out saying "as you go, proclaim the good news. Cure, raise, cleanse, release, give, serve. That's the work of evangelism. I will not ask you to knock on strangers' doors and hand out pamphlets. But I will ask something much harder. I'll ask you to remember our history – one that reaches out, and down, and across, and through the things that divide us – to be counter-cultural. I'll ask you to find a way to show the difference Jesus makes within you by sharing it beyond you. I'll ask you to remember the impact community has had on your growth as a human being and to be that community for someone else. I'll ask you to live like you believe what you hear on Sunday morning the rest of the week. I'll ask you to talk to your family, your friends, your co-workers. These are the harvest God has placed in your path, and honestly, you have to be much more vulnerable to talk to people you know than strangers you don't. You've seen the conference video today, you've learned a tiny fraction of our history today, but I'm not asking you to go out and be Methodist. I'm asking you to go out and follow Jesus. And I'm promising that you don't go alone. When Jesus commissioned his followers at the end of Matthew's gospel and sent them out to proclaim the good news and baptize in his name, he assured them that he'd be with us always, to the end of time and beyond. The Spirit has already laid the path. And I'm going with you. Evangelism is something we do together. It's a shared ministry. We can't do this without each other. Our world needs good news. Our world needs saving grace. Our world desperately needs community. Our world needs all of us. Step by step, hand in hand, as we go. Ready?

Amen.