

The Second Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 6—Year A

Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)

Psalms 116:1, 10-17

Romans 5:1-8

Matthew 9:35-10:8(9-23)

What a week. I preached the sermon about **the hate having to stop** *last Sunday*. When I sat down to write this sermon on Thursday morning, I couldn't. Sometimes, we just don't have more words to speak. It felt heavy.

Sounds like it was heavy in Jesus' time, too.

It sounds like there's a lot of **disease**, a lot of **sickness**, and it's not just a **city** issue or a **village** issue, but it's an *everywhere* issue. It sounds like there's a lot of people feeling **harassed** and **helpless**. It sounds like there's a lot folks **looking for guidance** and **someone to point a way forward**. **When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them**; he could see they were plumb wore out. **He turned to his disciples**, to those who took their cues off of him, and he said, **"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."**

There's a lot of work to do, but not many people willing to get in there and do the backbreaking hard work. **Jesus is asking the disciples to ask him to send them as those laborers**; Jesus wants *them to ask* to be sent. So often, we're trying to discern what God is calling us to do—here, it's not about discerning the *what*, it's just about a willingness *to go straight into the hard work*. **Are we willing to ask Jesus to send us out as laborers in this harvest, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom** that *there is a way forward* through this **disease** and **sickness** in our individual and societal soul?

Well, Jesus doesn't wait for their answer, **he summoned his disciples and gave them authority**—ἐξουσία, *the power of choice and the liberty of doing as one pleases*—**he gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness**.

Okay, we need to pause here. In this moment, in this week that has been so very hard in our country, in this season of division, **Jesus has summoned us, his disciples, and he has given us authority, the power to choose and the liberty to act as we please, with regards to these unclean spirits that have entered our civil soul. Jesus has given us power to cast these spirits out, and to cure this disease** in our national psyche that is making us all sick. ἐξουσία, *the power to choose* how we dance or don't dance with these **unclean spirits, the liberty to do as we please**, not based on our own sense of rights, but based on our *alignment* with Jesus; this is true *liberty*, indeed. It is the **power** *not* to give ourselves over to these currents sweeping our country. But brothers and sisters, let us be clear, **we are disciples, and Jesus has summoned us and given us authority** to do the work at hand.

And as with **the twelve** long ago, we are sent with **instructions**. *First*, **"Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel..."** We are to start close in, in those places that we know, maybe among those most like us, maybe among our families, our friends, our co-workers, our neighbors. Jesus isn't asking us

to leap tall buildings; **Jesus is asking us to go among the lost sheep of the house closest to us,** and it's hard because those **sheep** often don't think of themselves as **lost**.

**“As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near...’** As we make our way, we are **proclaiming**, with our words, with our deeds, that **the kingdom of heaven, God's realm has drawn nigh**; it's right here, right now. And if we're delivering that **proclamation** as *bad* news, full of fear and judgment, then it's *not* **the kingdom of heaven** that we're **proclaiming**, but some other *kingdom of control*.

We are to **“cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons...”** This is a hands-on endeavor. The NRSV translates *θεραπεύω* (like “*therapy*”) as “*cure*,” but it really means “*heal*.” We are called to be healers. **Jesus is sending us out to heal this sickness sweeping our nation. We are to raise that which has died back into life,** and that's about breathing hope into despair. **We are to touch, cleanse, καθαρίζω** (like “*cathartic*”), **we are to consecrate those and that which society deems untouchable.** That could be a person *and* that could be talking about all the stuff nobody wants to talk about that is infecting us collectively. **And we are to cast out demons**—we are to *cast out those instruments of the powers and principalities, ἐκβάλλω, drive out with force those forces that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, eject those internal inclinations that draw us from the love of God.* This is not a spectator sport; this is the hard, hard work of living *the renunciations of our baptismal vows* and *not* giving energy to these forces that are *not* holy—these are the hard “no's” that come with baptismal living.

*Then, Jesus reminds us that we are to give as freely as we've been given.*

*Then, it gets really hard. As Jesus sends us out into this sick, dead, untouchable, demonic field,* Jesus says this, **“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...”** We don't get to take a thing for protection, nada, nothing, *no armor to guard our hearts*. We go with the **love** in our hearts, the **wisdom** in our souls; we go with **clear eyes** to see and **courageous mouths** to speak. We go with **the trust that we will be given what we need to sustain the work that is ours to do.**

*The instructions continue with wise counsel. When you enter this field where God is asking you to work,* you're not going to be able to tell where the *safe places* are, those *resting places* to land. And so, **we lead with generous hearts.** Remember, *we don't get to take any armor in.* **We enter a space, we greet it, we bid it welcome, we wish it well, we receive it joyfully.**

*And after we've done that,* we need to do a little discerning. Is this space **congruent** with me because we need an *anchor place* and that *anchor place* needs to be a *place of rest*. This work is hard, and these *resting places*, these places that can support us in this **labor** are important. The NRSV talks in terms of “**worthiness**,” but it's not how we think of *being worthy*, which often feels more like *being blameless*. This **worthiness** is about **having the same weight as another thing**. This is more about a place that **matches your strength**, it's **congruent** with you; there's a **harmony**. **When you find that place, don't guard your peace; let your peace flow out upon it.** This is a *safe harbor*, out of the raging, warring winds swirling all around, **bless it with**

*tranquility*. If it's not *congruent* with you, that peace won't have a place to land, so let it return to you.

If you're not welcomed, or if your words just can't get a hearing, don't beat your head against the wall. It's time to shake the dust of your feet and move on. Fields are needing **harvesting everywhere**. It's a good principle—in this work of **healing the sickness** among us, we expend energy, but our energy isn't infinite; we want to be good stewards of that energy and get to a place where what we can offer *can be received*.

Then, Jesus gives us a good dose of realism. “**Yep, sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves;**”—yippee—“**so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they're going to hand you over to councils and flog you, even in the places that should be the most religious; and you'll be dragged before governing authorities because of me.**” Wow, really makes you want to sign up for this duty, right?

But it's a pretty **wolfy** world out there right now. And Jesus *won't let us take our armor*, so we're **pretty much sheep in this wolfy world**. But he's telling us all of this so we won't be blindsided, so that we won't be naïve. **We have been given a beautiful wisdom, and there is an innocence present when the only thing that has your back is the cross—that's true freedom**. And though “**beware**” sounds like we're supposed to *put up our guard*, again, it's not a great translation—it's more about “*being attentive to.*” **We're attentive to these dynamics all around us**. We're *attentive* to the **wolves**; we're *attentive* to the religious and governing authorities that don't like this crossing of the great divides **proclaiming that there is another way**; we're *attentive* to these dynamics that resist the notion that **the kingdom of heaven where God's love reigns has already drawn nigh**, and we understand that this is *not* the kingdom that they want to rule. We're *attentive* to these oppositional dynamics, and we *don't* oppose them; we **simply know where our wisdom rests and our true worth lies**.

And then we **trust**. When these dynamics are coming at us hard, **we don't worry about what we are to speak or what we are to say; for what we are to say will be given to us at that time; for it isn't we who speak, but the Spirit speaking through us**. Oh my gosh what a relief! We don't have to run endless narratives through our head planning out our point and counterpoint. We just have to **be attentive and trust that when it is our time to speak, God will give us the words**.

*Jesus isn't sugarcoating anything this morning*. There's a lot of **conflict** out there. Lots of **betrayal** by those closest to us. Lots of **rising up against one another**, even in relationships that used to be ones of safety. Jesus doesn't mince words, “**You will be hated by all because of my name.**”

**If you live a cruciform life, if you try to extend love and compassion and understand in all directions, as Jesus did, at some point, they'll all hate you.**

But **the one who endures to the end will be saved**. Again, “**endure,**” not the best word. **The one who remains, who abides, who doesn't recede or flee, the one who is brave enough just to stay put, until the end, until the fullness of whatever is unfolding comes complete, the one who can simply abide finds that healing wholeness that we call salvation.**

*That's the long view*, but in these *instructions* to disciples, **even Jesus leaves a space for a little fleeing to the next town when persecution is in play.** Being a **disciple** is not about being a doormat—there is a little bit of **wise as a serpent, innocent as a dove discernment** that always needs to be going on. It's a *stewardship* issue, and it's a *boundary* issue.

Where can the **power** that wants to flow through me find a **place to land**, and where will that **power** be stymied or resisted?

**Abiding in** who you are as **follower of Jesus and lover of God's third way** is also about being *so detached from your ego* that you can *release* the desire to convert this poor soul in front of you who's **persecuting** you and **move on to the next town.** And Jesus adds a promise, **“You won't make the rounds of all these towns before the Son of Man comes.”** In the end, **it's all in the Son of Man's hands**, not ours

Whew. This is a lot to think about, but it's seems to be pretty good **wisdom for the fields around us** that are needing to be worked.

It's been a week, and all indications are that these weeks won't stop coming. But if we are ever to *eat the bread of peace* and *drink the wine of communion* with one another across this land, we don't get to opt out of **the labor of the harvesting.**

**We're sheep**, but *choosing not to defend* is *different* than *being defenseless.*

*We take no armor to guard our hearts*, and yet **we are given all power and authority to cast out these demons, and get on with the work of healing, touching, consecrating, and breathing life back into so much that seems so dead** right now.

**The wisdom of serpents, and the innocence of doves.**

**A willingness to lead with generosity, and the wisdom to know when it's time to let go and move on.**

The capacity **to wish peace and tranquility amidst raging wars of conflict.**

*This life of discipleship is just a bundle of paradoxes.*

And through it all, even in those times when we're thrashed about by these wider societal dynamics, we remember—**Jesus is Lord of the harvest, the Son of Man is always coming, and the kingdom of heaven has already come.**

The world is *different* for **Jesus' life and death and resurrection**, *and yet*, the world is *still awaiting the fullness of communion*—with God and with one another—that is our **inheritance.**

Today, and in the week to come, let us do our part in harvesting **the peace of God which passes all understanding.** Amen.

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