



Third Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Sharmain James



Sunday 18 June 2023

READINGS

Genesis 18:1-15; Psalm 116:1-2,11-18; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35—10:8

Jesus and his followers

Though he was challenging and contentious, Jesus always could draw a crowd. Some came because he had miraculously healed the lame or fed thousands. Others were there for the scandal, like when Jesus dined with Matthew a tax-collector. Whatever the reason, thousands gather around him to see what he might do next.

But today's passage in Matthew reminds us that it is not only what Jesus will do, but what will those who follow Jesus - do next? In our reading today, we hear Jesus sees the crowds. We don't know how many it takes to make a crowd, but it's a lot of people too many to number. Jesus sees them. This is the same seeing that we read in Genesis 1 when "God saw all that He created..." and on which He pronounces His 'very good.' The same One who 'saw all that He had made" in the beginning saw the crowds. And His verdict is that it is not very good. When Jesus saw the crowds, He saw the people whom he created, "harassed and helpless." And the emotion that this produces in Him is neither disgust nor despair or regret but "compassion."

Many people go through life wondering if anyone notices. The crowds Jesus saw were "helpless and harassed" - He noted they were like sheep without a shepherd - they had neither protector nor provider. Look around today. Some people are tossed about by injustice, grief, and abuse of authority. Others are flayed by disease, economic strain, and isolation and fear. What do you see in our global, national and local communities today? Jesus sees. He sees the crowds. He sees their helplessness. He sees those who are harassing them, and He does not look away. The Pharisees saw the people as chaff to be destroyed and burned up. But Jesus saw them as a harvest to be reaped and saved. He realized that volunteers were needed to teach and heal the people because "The harvest is great, but the workers are few. The compassion of Jesus, which arises from seeing the suffering of the crowds, leads Him to gather the 12 disciples.

Our gospel reading gives us the names of the disciples that Jesus chose. This was a mixed group of imperfect people – one would deny Jesus, one would betray him, one worked for the Roman occupiers, and one actively worked against the Romans. Jesus did not recruit a picture-perfect group. In all the gospels the disciples are not shining examples of those who understand all Jesus is doing. They aren't the best and the brightest. They are not always the examples for us to follow. Yet, Jesus entrusts those ordinary people to do his work in the world. And it was not a watered-down version of the ministry Jesus was doing, but the exact same work. Jesus sends them to cast out demons and heal diseases. The students are to mirror their teacher even though they only began following Jesus a short time earlier.

Jesus clearly shares his vision with his followers and sends them out to share in his ministry. The first instruction was: Not to go into pagan territory or to visit Samaritan towns on their first venture into ministry. A lot of people are puzzled as to why Jesus asks this of his disciples. Why does Jesus explicitly instruct the twelve to stay away from Gentiles? Why can't they go to a Samaritan town? Instead they are to go to the house of Israel. One reason can be that - the apostles were not well-trained for preaching to the Gentiles. But perhaps Jesus first mission is to clean up the house of Israel first. Israel, after all, was the holy nation, the kingdom of priests, the light set on a hill that would lure all nations out of the darkness. Israel's mission, according to centuries of prophecy, was to be the beacon.

So it wasn't really narrow or xenophobic at all for Jesus to concentrate the original mission on the house of Israel. If you're going to get all those ships into safe harbour, start by refurbishing the lighthouse. Because this nation is the beacon destined to draw all others, it is here that the teacher must begin to teach, and the healer begin the process of healing. Matthew will end his gospel with the "great commission," when a new sending takes place and this time "to all nations." It is important to see that the call here is patterned off the work of Jesus himself, who comes first to Israel and then to the wider world. Just because they do not go now to the Samaritan cities does not mean they will never visit there. In fact in Acts 1, Samaria is specifically mentioned as to a place that they will go once the Spirit comes upon them.

We may not always fully comprehend the call of God, nor do we always have the opportunity to see the entirety of where God is leading us. We may wish to see further ahead or alter the path laid before us in the here and now. But the call of faithful discipleship is to allow Christ to lead us to the next step in the present moment. What might God be calling us to notice and respond to, in our communities today? Be healers in the modern world: People are sick in body as well as mind. As Christians sharing Jesus' mission, we can bring healing and wholeness to people with whom we come into contact. Although we cannot raise the dead, we can help people to recover interest and a zest for living. People can be physically alive but dead in many other respects.

"Cleansing the lepers" means rehabilitating and bringing back fully into our communities all those who, for one reason or another, are marginalized, rejected, despised, and ostracized on the basis of race, nationality, marital status, religion, gender or sexual orientation. We have to help cast out from our people the demons who possess them by means of addictions to alcohol, drugs, pornography - and the like, first by getting ourselves liberated and then helping others to get liberated from their addictions.

The gospel reading for Trinity Sunday reminded us of the Great Commission or sending. In a sense, this week's reading gives us the background. Before the sending is the gathering. Before the gathering is the compassion. Before the compassion is the seeing. Amen