



June 28, 2020 - From Death To Life

Given by Rev. Mattei

Jeremiah 28:5-9; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

In the past few weeks, we have been reflecting on Jesus' ministry to the crowds that, in his own words, are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36). So, he encourages his disciples to raise a heartfelt prayer to God. Jesus says, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (9:37-38).

It becomes immediately clear that Jesus intends for his disciples to be the answer to their prayer as he sends them out on their first mission. For that purpose, Jesus gives them power over unclean spirits. His mandate is clear: "go 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 the lepers, cast out demons." (vv. 6-8) The gospel lesson assigned for today concludes Jesus' missionary discourse.

For now, the time before Jesus' death and resurrection, the messianic message is targeted to their fellow Israelites. It's an inside job. Yet, the disciples are advised

not to fool themselves: there will be opposition to their message (vv. 34-39). Those who should be familiar with the ways of Yahweh, those who should recognize the salvific actions of God, those whom one would expect should rejoice for those who are cured and reintegrated into community life, will resist any change and give the disciples grief. They don't care that those oppressed by sin, poverty, and illness go free and the dead are raised to new life. They'd rather preserve their status and affirm their self-righteousness by pointing out how morally superior they are. This way, the walls of separation are established and maintained.

The disciples need to make peace with the fact that those who should know better will not warm up to them. They will not listen to what the disciples have to offer: the new message competes with an older one and just like one cannot put new wine in old wineskins, so does the new messianic message need an openness of mind and heart.¹ Jesus was clear about this earlier on in the gospel: what is holy is not for the dogs and a pearl is not to be thrown to pigs (Matthew 7:6-8). When ears are stopped, you have

¹ Matthew 9:14-17



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nothing to teach it's time to shake off the dust from your feet and move on (vv.14 and 23).

Jesus does not stop there. He warns the disciples not to be surprised if they are met with personal attacks. They will encounter indifference at a minimum. They will also be subjected to relentless vicious attacks not by strangers but by those in the house. Haters will try to shame them, mock them, blame them, isolate them, and ultimately punish them. But they are to non-violently endure till the end, trusting the saving presence of the Spirit of Jesus. Nothing should surprise them: in fact, the disciples are not going to be treated any differently than their master. The opposite should actually be true: if the disciples encounter no resistance, are they truly living in integrity with the message of Jesus? Are they honestly representing him? Are they siding with the oppressed? Should they choose silence in the face of injustice and opt for quiet living? If people call Jesus names; indeed, if people call Jesus the devil, will the disciples stomach being called the house of the devil (vv. 24-25)?

Twice Jesus encourages his disciples not to fear the in-house antagonists and killers (vv. 26 and 28): the malevolent plot will be exposed and the God who creates also protects what belongs to Her. One way or another, whatever whisper of truth the disciples hear in their small group needs to be proclaimed from rooftops (v. 27).

But not all will reject the message. Jesus, in fact, closes his discourse on a positive note with a word of blessing. There is a benefit to those who are open to the message and welcome the disciples: in so doing they welcome God as well. This is the good news of the gospel: openness to the message facilitates openness to the messenger and the same reward offered to the messenger (i.e. kingdom life in the Spirit of God) is available to those who receive the message. And there is not much effort to be made: a glass of cold water will do!²

Sent by God, Jesus sends his disciples to participate in his mission of proclaiming in word and deed the good news of God's liberating kingdom drawing near. In Matthew's

² See also Mt. 25:34-35



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understanding, the church is a "sent" church, a missionary church (Matthew 28:18-20), a church that is not settled and static but constantly being moved and on the journey. That is the identity of the church.

Mission is not just a program of the church; it is the defining purpose of everything the church does. The vocation of every baptized person is to live by the words of Jesus in the context of everyday life from one Sunday worship to the next. We don't live our faith only one hour on Sunday morning. There is no off time for a Christian. All our conversations, all our interactions, all our deeds ought to be liberating interventions of the Spirit of God operating through us. That is how the kingdom of God comes!

Sometimes, we forget what we are about. Sometimes, we become complacent. Sometimes, the radical message of Jesus makes us uncomfortable and we water it down.

Sometimes, we are not about healing the sick, casting out the demons, and setting the captives free.

Not that we don't want to. It's simply that we do not connect the dots. We don't ask ourselves: Who are the sick we are not healing? Could they be those working two and even three low paying jobs with no benefits and no health coverage?

What are the demons we are not casting out? Could they be discrimination of age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic minorities, and religion? Could they possibly be environmental degradation, insufficient affordable housing, and homelessness?

Who are the captives we are not helping to set free? Those with salaries insufficient for the care of the basic needs of shelter, food and health? Those who are blamed for not lifting themselves by their bootstraps. People don't like to hear all that. They silence the prophets and harass the messengers.

And Christians are not immune to that. Prophets remain ignored or are dismissed as reactionaries. That's when our churches are turned into private clubs of like-minded



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people, satisfied with an innocuous piety that barely gives a veneer of religiosity, acceptability, and respectability.

It's easy to ignore, dismiss, and silence any voice heard from the housetop that aims at awaking people's conscience. People grow so accustomed to eyes that don't see and ears that don't hear that it simply becomes a way of life. Yet, the gospel *is* supposed to shake people at their foundation and make them uncomfortable.³

Do we find ourselves in that crowd? If that is the case, watch out. If we pay attention, that's when we get to hear the good news intended for us. That's how we ourselves get liberated.

This is how it works: When we first hear the gospel message, it may sound harsh. That's the Law exposing our sin and unwillingness to have a change of heart. We don't like it one bit and so we resist, stomp and spout.

But if we are blessed, God will keep on trying to reach us: God is the guest who waits at the door and knocks.⁴ As we let the Word of God convict us, our hearts get softened and become fertile ground for transformation: the seed of God has a chance to take root and sprout. That is the gospel to us. But we need to be convicted first. We need to go through purging first. We need to repent, confess, and seek forgiveness. The mercy of God opens our eyes and allows us to experience the Word of God as both Law and Gospel.

Renewed in the Spirit we feel like life has been given back to us. We rejoice at the gift and find ways to demonstrate our gratitude: we offer more than a glass of cold water to the messenger that has brought us God's salvation. We can truly sing with the prophet: "How wonderful are the feet of those who bring good news!"⁵ At the same time we realize in all humility how fragile our faith is and how watchful we need to be lest we

³ James 1:9-10

⁴ Revelation 3:20

⁵ Isaiah 52:7



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lose it. That faith moves us to collaborate to bring the kingdom of heaven here on earth. If we are not fierce about our faith, then what's the

point? God hears the cry of the oppressed.⁶ If God is paying attention to them, shouldn't we as well? Isn't that our call?

The gospel reward, promised to those who welcome the messenger, is intended for us first of all. We are the sick and the captives Jesus has come to heal and liberate. As we hear it and act on it, we get forgiven, equipped and sent.

When we participate in the announcement of the liberating gospel, we get blessed again, a second time around as both the giver and the receiver become aware of being siblings in the same household, called to create a new community. Then we become a church on the move and not settled; a church that is not self-centered but other-centered; a penitent church that has experienced resurrection through the healing power of the gospel.

We carry a message people will not want to hear. If they do, we'll get to enjoy a new reality together with them.

Pray this week for those who will receive your message and acknowledge you with a glass of cold water.

May the Good Lord bless us all and help us hear the good news of salvation. Amen.

⁶ see Psalm 10:17-18; Exodus 22:22-23; Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 24:19-22