Matthew 9:35-10:23

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. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

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. 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; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather 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. You received without payment; give without payment. 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. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

The stories of God for the people of God... thanks be to God!
This summer we’re going to be spending some time in the Gospel of Matthew.

If you were listening in on the last two Sundays, this might create a little whiplash as we go from being on the mountain with 11 disciples about to be sent out into the world without Jesus, to today’s reading, right in the middle of his ministry and the beginning of theirs.

Matthew is where we find the Sermon on the Mount. After that, Jesus begins to move among the people and see if you can find a theme in what he is asked to do: He heals a centurion’s servant (8:5ff), he heals many at Peter’s house (8:14ff), he heals demoniacs (8:28ff), he heals a paralytic (9:2ff), he brings a girl back to life and heals the hemorrhaging woman (9:18ff), he heals two blind men (9:27ff), he heals one who was mute (9:32ff) and then he really gets into it in the passage Margaret read to us: Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, curing every disease and every sickness.

The main thing the people want from him, is healing. And it’s here that Jesus seems to look up and realize that he can’t do it all by himself.

I don’t know who needs to hear this – but Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, part of the blessed Trinity – couldn’t do it all himself. He needed help.

So Jesus pulls together his disciples – Matthew lists their names for us in verses two through four and then Jesus tells them the fun part (I mentioned some of these last week). Here is the big recruitment speech:

• Take no money with you.
• Don’t bring a change of clothes.
• If folks don’t welcome you – leave.
• I’m sending you out to be sheep among wolves.
• You could get flogged.
• You might get dragged in front of authorities.
• People are going to hate you.
• If you really start to get into trouble, run to the next town.

One can almost imagine Jesus then saying, “Okay, hands in…. ‘martyr’ on three! One… two.. three!

Guys?

I mean, no wonder he ends up on the mountain at the end of this Gospel with one less disciple than he started with.

The call to be a disciple of Jesus is not an easy one. The task of proclaiming the Good News: “the Kingdom of Heaven has come near” is a tedious and dangerous one.
And Matthew’s sense of urgency only adds to the pressure. We’re living in the world as it is, but we know of the Kingdom of God, the world as it should be. What are we waiting for? “Hurry up and tell them,” Matthew says.

How do we proclaim that in the midst of wolves?
At the threat of being flogged?
At the risk of being dragged? Betrayed? Hated?

How do we proclaim the world as it should be, when so many of us have a stake in the world as it is?

Because we have to receive the Good News and believe the Good News before we can proclaim the Good News.

Do we have the ears to hear?

Today’s text in the lectionary is paired up with a familiar one from Genesis. Abraham and Sara – who are well advanced in age – have set up camp out in the wilderness and in the “heat of the day” Abraham sees three strangers standing before him and he runs to greet them, bowing to the ground.

Abraham washes their feet, brings them bread, has a feast prepared for them – and the strangers then tell him that he and Sarah are going to have a son. Sarah was listening in at the tent entrance and she laughs at the news.

“After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?”
The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’
Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?
At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.”

But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. And the Lord said, “Oh yes, you did laugh” (Genesis 18:12-15).

Abraham rushes to welcome the visitors and Sarah is dubious about the news they bring. The Gospel of Matthew wants us to hurry up and tell folks about the kingdom of God... but Jesus warns his disciples that some people will reject that message.

We often hear this passage in Matthew as a pep talk for us – we are disciples, right? Sure... but we have to believe the message first. And I think a lot of times we are a lot like Sarah, and not so much like Abraham.
The kingdom of God is one of healing and wholeness.  
   Do we believe that?

The kingdom of God is one of justice and mercy.  
   Do we believe that?

The kingdom of God is one of liberation and equity.  
   Do we believe that?

Do we have ears to hear?

Some of us are old enough to remember miniseries. That's right kids, back in the day we had to watch something when it was on, none of this streaming business. Some of you are old enough to remember when the television miniseries *The North and the South* came out on tv – the one with Patrick Swayze and Kirstie Alley.

I had to look it up to get the facts right, it originally aired in 1985, but it must have been aired again, maybe on TBS in 1988 or 1989 because I remember watching it in college out in the lobby with our entire dorm. It was one of the only times that the Black people in the dorm and the white people were watching the same thing.

I remember we were watching a scene with Kirstie Alley (who is white) and Georg Stanford Brown (who is Black) and someone sitting in my vicinity said a nasty, racist comment. “What did you say?” came from across the room. I said nothing, staying focused on the tv, hoping it would blow over and go away.

It didn’t.

“What did you say...” now there was yelling and anger and people standing and shaking fists and nobody watching the tv and it suddenly dawned on me in absolute horror, that the people who were angry thought it was me that made the comment.

“It wasn’t me,” I pleaded. “I would never say such a thing, I didn’t do it.”

So much yelling, so much anger, and I was so mad – how dare they accuse me of being a racist? I grew up being told to love my neighbor. My Dad would let the guys who were Black who worked for him at the restaurant take the extra food home. I hung out in Sunday School class with my black friend, I even got mad when someone else in the class said that she should obviously be the robber in the Good Samaritan story.

I’m a good person, how could you call me a racist?
Things were strained in that dorm for the rest of the year. And I carried my self-righteous anger about that incident with me all the way to seminary, which was five years later.

There was a racist incident on campus where a person in the cafeteria line called a Black person who was working in the cafeteria a monkey (something at that point, I didn’t know how major racist connotations). That comment sparked anger and a mandatory seminar that we all had to go to. I came in with my “I am not a racist how dare they call me one” chip on my shoulder. They had a white person and a Black person act out a case scenario and I sat there with my arms crossed and my eyes rolling... and then the speaker said something like this, “If something offends you, really makes you want to push back in a “how dare you” visceral kind of way – look inward. Because that’s a sign that something’s there.

It’s true, I didn’t say that racist comment back in college. But I didn’t call out the person who did, either. I rode that wave of people telling me “how dare they” and never once thought about how hard it had to be on that campus where 95% of us were white.

I never did the work, because I didn’t have to. I went to my history classes, supposedly I learned about slavery and reconstruction and Jim Crow... supposedly, but then didn’t even consider that there might be some tension around Blacks and whites, watching The Blue and The Gray together, in the south? I didn’t have to think about that because I’m in the white majority. That’s privilege.

These are really hard conversations, and hopefully you have heard me give my honest testimony here and you haven’t turned your computer or television off yet.

I want to understand this moment that we’re in together with you.

I want to learn and process and take action with you.

I want us to make this world a better place so that Black people can go to bed at night and not worry about being killed in their sleep.

I want us to make this world a better place so that Black people can go for a jog or come home from the convenience store and not be killed because the color of their skin made them suspect.

I want to make this world a better place so that Black people don’t get served an on-the-spot death penalty for using a counterfeit $20.

What stories are we telling ourselves?

What are the beliefs that we hold so deeply that we don’t even notice we have them?

How are we closing the door on God’s messengers?
And you, like me and Sarah, may laugh and be wondering, “Do we really believe that things can change?”

Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?

Keep listening, even when the messengers tell you something that’s hard to hear.
And I promise, I will too.¹

Let us pray:

We are not people of fear:
We are people of courage.
We are not people
who protect our own safety:
we are people
who protect our neighbors’ safety.
We are not people of greed:
we are people of generosity.
We are your people God,
giving and loving,
wherever we are,
whatever it costs
for as long as it takes
wherever you call us.
Amen.

~ Prayer by Barbara Glasson, president of the Methodist Conference, Britain ~

Sojourners, June 2020

¹ Questions posed at the end of this story are thanks to: https://marthaspong.com/2020/06/10/the-stories-we-tell-ourselves/