

Matthew 9.35-10.8 Sending the Twelve 2020

It's difficult to connect the sending of the disciples with our lives just now, in isolation. When I read these passages – and they occur in all the gospels – I usually am struck by the way in which Jesus sends the disciples out. His instructions are to travel very light. So, my focus is usually on what is distracting me from what Jesus is sending us to do. But as that virus is still with us, we aren't yet completely safe, many think, to go out to interact with others.

So, this time, what stands out to me is the phrase:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

In today's passage, out of compassion, Jesus sends out his disciples to heal the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel.'

Not the gentiles, as in that final commission in the 28th chapter, and not the Samaritans, as Jesus heals elsewhere,

but here they are sent to those Jews are lost, and harassed, and hopeless.

And they are sent to heal the body, which is a sign of God's movement in the world.

So, we have a key to a theology of social justice: healing and restoration are evidence of God's work in fulfilling God's covenantal plan for all creation.

I wonder – who are the 'sheep without a shepherd' today, in our social and civil unrest? Certainly, today's victims of societal injustice are harassed and hopeless.

The video of the white policeman with his knee on a black man's neck, held through his pleas of 'I can't breathe' and even after he could no longer plea, seems at the very least to be an example of 'helpless.'

'Harassed' does seem to describe the treatment by some of the police of black people. If I thought I could be killed by police on suspicion of crime without due process, I know I would feel helpless and harassed. It's hard to even imagine it.

And that could be why black slaves were religious – they needed God so much.

Is reaching out to that group in kindness and a desire to help what is our takeaway this week? Certainly, it is.

Yet, let's look at the other side of this; the policemen who now face charges. Like the Jews the disciples were sent to heal, they are our own. And seem lost. The ones to whom we are sent. The ones with so much fear and hatred in their hearts. And, too, I find myself focusing on the fact that systemic racism – those of us who continue to allow the unequal treatment of a racial group – may be the ones who are lost.

We are told by our forefathers that all people are created equal. We are taught by scripture that God created us equal and loves us equally. We are commanded by our Savior Jesus the Christ to love one another. Any of us who doesn't treat every person out of the knowledge that we are all equally loved and valued by God, and with the respect that follows, has lost the way to the kingdom of God.

So – is the message for us today that we as Christians are being sent to reach out to those unjustly treated, to bring God's love and support? Or, is it to notice that it isn't the victims of injustice who need the message of Jesus to 'love one another' -- so much as the people who commit hateful crimes and those in power who are allowing injustice to happen. And those with fear of the 'other' that brings them to kill rather than to love and help.

My heart aches as I write this. I have not been to a demonstration since the Vietnam War. Perhaps the social isolation is making me more aware of the pain of so many, by not allowing me to go out and distract myself from that pain. But, today's gospel is an opportunity for us to look into our hearts, pray, and do what we can bring the kingdom of God to all of God's children.

Surely we, as well as our neighbors, are among the harassed and helpless that Jesus sees, those with "every disease and every sickness."

But, as the baptized, we are also those to whom Jesus has committed his mission, that of healing and restoration, and we have often failed.

Nonetheless, God says, "I have brought you to myself."

Because of Jesus Christ, forgiveness and love have been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Just as the twelve disciples stand for the Israelites,

called to be a people of priests for all the world,

we too are given the charge to pray for all

and by our action to bear witness to the healing love of God,

all of us together Christ's priestly people for the sake of the world.