

June 14th, 20202

Matthew 9:35-10:8 “Reclaiming Simplicity”

We're on week 7 of a series about re-claiming the teachings of Jesus. So why do we need to do this if we already bear the name “Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)?” We're all about Jesus, right? In theory. But lately churches who lay claim to the teachings of Jesus have had an increasingly difficult time convincing the world that they take these teachings seriously. And this isn't a new thing either. The church has struggled with its credibility on and off all during its 2,000 year existence. The church moves through cycles, and if you've been with us for our Bible study on Revelation, you'll realize that everything in history is on a cycle. History repeats itself. When the church is in alignment with the values of the Reign of God, our light shines, and great things happen. But when we're in alignment with the values of the Kingdoms of the World, things fall apart. Whenever the Kingdom of God starts breaking through the darkness, the darkness *always* pushes back and tries to extinguish the light. But then a shift occurs and the light of truth breaks through. We are in a shift right now. The powers and principalities of the world are collapsing, and we are *potentially* in a position to bear the light of God's Kingdom. But we need to get right with Jesus first. That's why we're spending time studying the red letters in our Bibles ... the words of Jesus. We want to make sure that we're in alignment with God so that we can be the best ambassadors for God's Kingdom that we can be.

Last week, we went from John's gospel to Matthew's gospel. Last week our intention was to reclaim and recover the idea of “mission.” And I said that it's great that we're crossing over into Matthew's gospel because Matthew is all about mission. Last week, we learned about the Great Commission. This was Jesus' *last* instructions for his disciples. This week we're going to be looking at his *first* instructions to the disciples. Jesus had been out in Galilee teaching and healing for 5 chapters straight according to Matthew, when all of a sudden one day he

looked out on the crowds and “had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” That sounds strange to our ears because we don’t have a full understanding of what “sheep without a shepherd” means. Sheep are pretty notorious for not being the most intelligent animals on the farm. In our current cultural context we use “sheep” as an insult for people who follow some *thing* or some *one* blindly. So when we hear that Jesus felt sorry for the crowds because they were like “sheep without a shepherd” we want to jump to the conclusion that they weren’t very smart and didn’t know where to go. That’s not the case here. See, the *reason* why Jesus had compassion on the crowd was that they were “harassed and helpless.”

Of the four gospels, Matthew has the strongest Jewish roots, so if we’re going to understand this passage, we’ve got to get a handle on what this sheep comment meant to a Jewish audience. Of all the Kings of Israel, David was the greatest. The nation was at its peak during his reign. David was known as the Shepherd King because as a boy, that’s what David did. He tended sheep. When he killed the Philistine’s champion Goliath, he did it using a smooth stone and a shepherd’s sling. As a King, David ruled like a shepherd who protected Israel from all the surrounding nations who wanted to devour Israel like a wolf. The crowds in this passage that Joe read were not stupid. They were Israelites who felt harassed by Rome ... the wolf that had occupied their land and taken control of their lives. They were without protection. They felt helpless. They needed a King, like David, who would drive out the wolf so they could feel safe again. They needed a shepherd. The question for those hearing these words from Matthew’s gospel was, “Could Jesus be that Shepherd King?” And we know the story so it’s easy for us to say, “Yeah, *of course* Jesus is the Shepherd King!” But for that lost crowd and for that early Christian community, they *weren’t* sure. So you’d think that Jesus would turn to his disciples and say, “These people need a shepherd. Let’s show them that *I’m* the Shepherd King Messiah that they’ve been looking for, and they don’t have to feel lost anymore. I’m here now. I’ve got this. No need to worry. It will be

okay.” No! Jesus moves everything in a completely new direction. He jumps from livestock to agriculture!

Instead of telling the crowd, “Don’t worry, I’ve got this,” he turns to his *disciples* and says, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, therefore ask the Lord of the Harvest to send laborers into his harvest.” Could you imagine the disciples’ reaction to this? “Wait, what are you saying, Jesus? Are you saying, ‘I can’t do this all by myself, I need your help?’ Because that doesn’t sound very ‘Messiah Shepherd King’ to us. Sounds more like, ‘I need you all to help bring this reign of God into being.’ Jesus, you’re supposed to come in with an army of angels with swords and bows and chariots to restore Israel to its glory days.” But then Jesus does something even more unexpected. He gives these 12 disciples authority to do what he’s been doing for the last five chapters, which is casting out unclean spirits, and curing people of their sickness! Everyone expects Jesus to come in and single handedly overthrow the system and restore the lost sheep of Israel to their rightful place. But instead he tells these disciples to go out *among* those lost sheep to cure them of what ails them? What good is that going to do?

What this does is sets a precedence for the kind of ministry that Jesus was sent by God to do. Instead of coming in with a traditional show of force to destroy the Roman oppressors along with the Jewish puppet state that was seduced by Rome’s wealth, Jesus came in armed only with the authority of his word and his acts of compassion. In Revelation we’ve been reading about how during the final battle of Armageddon, when Christ returns to defeat evil, he won’t be conquering with traditional swords made out of iron, but with the sword of His word. And that’s why he’s sending his disciples out in this passage. He’s saying, “The authority I pass on to you is the authority of my word. Go and proclaim this word to the lost sheep through your actions. Go tell them that the Reign of Heaven is within reach. It’s so close.”

That’s his commission to the disciples here in this passage. And what is our church called? The Christian Church (*Disciples* of Christ.) This is

our mission and ministry too. We are to go out into the places where there is the greatest need and minister to the ones who feel lost and disenfranchised and to show them that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Okay, but *what* does this look like? Especially in our current COVID-19 crisis where “going out into the places where there is the greatest need” can be harmful or even lethal due to this pandemic? People have been asking me, “What can we do? We’re in a vulnerable at-risk category health-wise. We’d love to be ‘out there,’ but we’re being told to stay ‘in here’ for our health and safety’s sake.” Well, on June 20, just six days from now, Rev. Dr. William Barber, one of our Disciples Ministers was scheduled to lead a march in Washington DC for his “Poor People’s Campaign.” Dr. Barber wrote one of the books that I read that has inspired me to talk about the church’s need to re-claim Jesus’ words and teachings. He believes that some of our most persistent social challenges that we’re facing are related to our failure to address poverty. In Luke chapter 4:18-19, Jesus proclaimed that his ministry was to “bring good news to the poor” and to “let the oppressed go free.” That’s what Rev. Barber’s ministry is all about. Setting the oppressed free so that we can all live equally under God’s reign. He’s been planning this march since February, but COVID-19 created a challenge. Some of Bill’s friends, colleagues, and loved ones were saying, “Bill! Why are you doing this? This could be dangerous! You’re in poor health. You’re going to be out walking with a crowd of people ... many who you don’t know ... during a pandemic that has claimed the lives of folks who face similar health problems as you.”

Challenging times require challenging innovations. Thankfully, we’ve discovered ways to do mission and ministry during a global pandemic. This Poor People’s Campaign March is now virtual. It’s “out there” yet still “in here.” I’ve posted a link to this event on our FaceBook page and Briony will be posting it on the website tomorrow. This is an opportunity to put faith into action and do some of that “Harvest Work” that Jesus is talking about in our scripture this morning. I will tell you, though, that there will be pushback from the Kingdoms of the Earth.

I've been telling you that for the last month and a half. This shouldn't surprise us though. As Frederick Buechner once said, "If the gospel of love is preached unopposed, then it is not the gospel of love."

Okay, Jesse, this is all fine and good, but your sermon was supposed to be "Reclaiming Simplicity!" None of this sounds remotely simple. This sounds like hard work. Not only does this require hard work as far as figuring all the technology involved, but it also requires some hard work on my part as far as challenging my own long-held assumptions about things. Yup. That's hard work. Here's where the simplicity comes in. And this is by no means simple either.

Notice what Jesus tells the disciples to do when they're out and about. He said, "You received without payment, give without payment." Luke's gospel fleshes this out a little more. In Luke 9:3-5, Jesus tells them, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." In other words, "Keep it simple." Don't get bogged down with "stuff." That's the agenda of the Kingdoms of the Earth. The Kingdoms of the Earth say, "Go out there and take what you can get." The Kingdom of God says, "Go out and give the world what you have." It's hard to boldly move out in the world and do the harvest work that Jesus calls us to do when we're tied down by "stuff" or worse yet, tied down by fear of not having enough. In order to do this harvest work that Jesus' calls us to do, we must let go of that which weighs us down and causes us to act with an attitude of scarcity instead of an attitude of abundance. This is why Jesus says that the laborers are few. So go, then, into the fields where the lost sheep are and bring in the harvest.