

Sermon for June 18, 2017 Outdoor Worship at First Lutheran Church

Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

Pastor Alan Bray

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of Jesus, Beautiful Savior and King of Creation! Amen

For those of you who might be expecting or hoping for a “Green” sermon this morning, I’m afraid that you’ll have to wait for another time. While I have many things to say about climate change, the Paris Accord and our congregation’s role in caring for God’s creation, today’s text from Matthew leads me in other directions. So, for the time being, simply remember to do whatever you can in Christ’s name to promote clean air, clean water and the protection of all things bright and beautiful.

Today’s lesson from St. Matthew’s gospel is a commissioning text. Filled with compassion for the crowds, whom Jesus describes as “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd,” he sends his twelve disciples out into the land of Israel with specific instructions: “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.” In effect, the disciples are given the authority to do the very kinds of things that Jesus himself has been doing throughout all the surrounding cities and villages.

I’d like to suggest that this reading is directed at each one of us as well. It could be argued that we are modern-day disciples commissioned and sent into the world to proclaim the good news that “the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.” And while most of us might say, “Yes, in the name of Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord, I can do that!”...we might have a little more difficulty with the caveats that follow: “Cure the sick. Raise the dead. Cleanse the lepers. Cast out demons.” These specific responsibilities seem a little above our pay grade. And yet, I wonder.

Let me digress for a moment. This coming October, our much-loved intern Caitlin Jensen, will learn from the Synodical Bishops of the ELCA where in the United States she’ll be assigned to begin her work as an ordained minister of word and sacrament. Once she’s received that geographical assignment, Caitlin can start to interview with congregations that are seeking to call a new pastor.

In all likelihood, these various congregations may well have lofty dreams and expectations for their new pastor-to-be.

- They may want their new pastor to preach as powerfully and effectively as Billy Graham or Barbara Brown Taylor.
- They may want their new pastor to bring in new members by the dozen and increase congregational giving ten or twenty fold.
- They may want their new pastor to lead the church with the efficiency and authority of a crackerjack corporate CEO.
- They may want their new pastor to sing like Caruso, to comfort children like Mr. Rogers and to counsel those in despair with the skills of Dr. Phil.

They may want all of that, and yet, what they NEED is simply...someone to love them, someone to help them love each other as Christ loves us all. The congregation that is lucky enough to call Caitlin Jensen as their pastor will get just that...someone who knows a lot about God's love, someone who understands how to help love grow among God's people. (Now it just so happens that Caitlin can also sing like Caruso, preach like Peter, run a good meeting and dazzle people with an unending stream of mind-numbing puns. But it is Caitlin's ability to love that will carry the day...and it is her ability to love that will be seen in all of these other skills and talents.

What's my point with all of this?

Well, I don't think that Jesus was trying to complicate the disciples' call to ministry by adding: "Cure the sick. Raise the dead. Cleanse the lepers. Cast out demons." All of those things, I think, were a natural part of proclaiming the good news that "the kingdom of heaven is near." He was simply putting flesh on the bones. In Christ Jesus and wherever his kingdom is proclaimed, the sick are cured, the dead are raised, outsiders are welcomed and demons are cast out.

As it was for the disciples long ago, so it is for us as well.

Anna Carter Florence, professor of preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary, puts it this way: "...in our world, in the world of discipleship, Jesus' words...ring true. They speak of things we have seen and known and believed: Christ is risen. The tomb is empty. The dead are raised; the blind receive their sight. Go and tell! In the world of discipleship, you have to use (such) biblical language because there just isn't any other way to talk about the kingdom of God. It is that raw and out-there and unabashedly literal." Cure! Raise! Cleanse! Cast out!

When Jesus asks us to proclaim that the kingdom of God is at hand, we understand the place of these biblical imperatives in that proclamation.

Again from Anna Carter Florence: "(This is what it means to be a disciple.) Cure the sick. Do not ignore the poisons that intoxicate us. Proclaim the power of God to heal us. Raise the dead. Do not leave us in our tombs. Proclaim the power of God to raise us up. Cleanse the lepers. Do not abandon the outcast in their misery. Proclaim the power of God to restore us to the community. Cast out demons. Do not accept demonic powers of evil. Proclaim the power of God to cast them out."

This morning, I simply wish to remind us that in the waters of baptism and empowered the Holy Spirit, we are called to proclaim (in word and deed) that the kingdom of God is at hand. In a world filled with folks who are "harassed and helpless, like sheep with a shepherd," our voices and our actions will bring new energy to the life-giving mission of Jesus. And in the process, the sick will be healed, that which is dead will be renewed, those who are estranged will be brought back into the fold, and that which is demonic will be sent packing.

Fellow disciples: Be of good courage! Proclaim the power of God's kingdom! Let love rule in your hearts and minds always!

In Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen

