

## June 28, 2020 (Focus: Matthew 10:40-42)

We are nearing the end of the first half of 2020, only two more days til this year is half way over, which some might say with good reason is not soon enough. Remember those innocent days in early January, when we made resolutions for the new year, when we looked forward to the day when our Fellowship Hall and kitchen (remember them?) were remodeled and we could hold events down there? Remember when we thought the toughest part of the year was going to be enduring campaign ads? Remember when we planned lunch dates with friends and vacations and parties? Remember when getting the kids out the door for school seemed tough?

It has been over three months now since we gathered in the sanctuary in our building at Atwood and Ohio, three months since schools were open, since we went to music lessons and concerts and movie theatres, three months since many of us have had a haircut. Our lives have been disrupted, lives that were already challenging, what with trying to make retirement work, or juggling job and family commitments, trying to raise good kids in a not always good world, finding ourselves becoming a parent to a parent, grieving a loss,...

Now we are dealing with a pandemic, and people who won't wear a mask or socially distance. A pandemic that led to a recession, and we are left wondering what the long term impact will be on jobs and work patterns. A pandemic that woke us up to long-standing racial inequalities in terms of health, wealth, work, housing, wages. A pandemic that clarified (literally) our view on climate change. And if that weren't enough, frightening, horrible videos have forced us to face up to the too often deadly inequalities among the races in terms of criminal justice. And all the while voting is made more difficult, or at least one is forced with making a choice whether to vote or keep oneself healthy.

Issues aren't always clear cut: we support the BLM protestors, but not the destruction of property. We acknowledge racism in our country and seek to make changes, but why do they have to be so angry...and why do they insist on such big changes, wouldn't it make more sense to make gradual reforms (and if some more people of color get killed in the meantime, well, at least its more likely we'll pass gradual reform)...

There is unrest out on the streets, and in our hearts...And yet we are called, again and again to do something, amid all the personal issues, and all the community issues, we are called as people of God, as the church, as followers of Christ, to do something.

As he calls us to follow him, Jesus gave us some instructions about what that meant. In Matthew's gospel, his instructions before he sends them out end with the three verses read here just now. Jesus does this in the context of his own ministry. He has been busy himself traveling all around, healing and teaching. He didn't set up shop somewhere and let the sick and struggling just come to him: Jesus feels deep compassion for the suffering and need of the "harassed and helpless" crowds, so he goes out, to where they are, and he heals them, restores them, and gives them hope. His instructions on how to do ministry are largely the example he set in what he said and did.

And what does he say to them, and what does he empower them to do? He tells them to cast out demons and cure every illness, offering gifts of compassion to announce the reign of God drawing near.

Jesus was very clear in his instructions, as we know from reading this sermon-speech over the course of several Sundays. He told his disciples to "proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'" That's what they were supposed to say, and do, usher in the kingdom of God.

What does the kingdom of heaven look like? How will we know it when we see it, or feel it? Jesus' keynote address, the Sermon on the Mount (which took three chapters, beginning with chapter five in Matthew), tells us a lot about the Reign of God. Blessed are...love one another...love your enemy...be salt and light...the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, a found pearl, a sower sowing seed with exuberant abandon.

The speech that ends today has given us even more information about how we can participate in that reign, now that we're inspired by Jesus' words and the way he lived his life. Along with those disciples, we're told to offer gifts of compassion: to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons.

Isn't it interesting that there seems to be far more emphasis on healing and raising than on the exact words and teachings they (we) should use? More emphasis, it seems, on the doing than on the saying, more emphasis on doing good than on holding the "correct" beliefs.

So what does the kingdom of God look like today? That is, what can we be doing, right now, for the sake of others? Wearing masks and social distancing...for others...stop using demeaning names and logos...for others...taking down flags and statues that uplift a group in our history that worked very hard to deny the personhood of human beings...for others...working to abolish chokeholds and profiling...for others...proclaiming Black Lives Matter...for others...working to abolish systems and institutions that perpetuate the idea that all people are not equal before God...for others.

This thing we call church is not about creeds, not about doctrine. It is about relationship...it is about people...Not just how is it for me, but equally how is it for you? We need to always remind ourselves that it is not what makes up the church as much as it is how is it that we are being the church.

How do we know we can do it, that we can be the church, that we can protect the environment, care for the poor, forgive often, reject racism, fight for the powerless, share earthly and spiritual resources, embrace diversity, enjoy this life, love God?...We can do it because we are not blazing a new trail, but walking in the footsteps of others...others who have worked for the dignity of all human beings...others who have worked for the good of the environment, and for children, and for the poor, and for those discriminated against just for who they are or who they love. We are walking in the footsteps of others who saw their faith not as a declaration of doctrines, but as an

expression of God's love for the world. We are walking in the footsteps of others who themselves walked in the footsteps of others, and so on, all the way back to the one who walked across Galilee and Judea, who walked among lepers and those possessed, who walked among sinners and those outcast by others, who walked as a living embodiment of the full expression of God's love.

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple — we are walking in the footsteps of one who blazed a mighty trail of love for us to follow. We can do this. And that is good news for us, and for the world, today.

Let us pray...

Let us turn our hearts and minds again to God in prayer. God of all, wrap us in your love and care today, in all ways, and always. May we each in our private concerns hear your universal call to come, lay down heavy burdens, and find a welcome rest, find renewal, find new patience and strength and courage, find a new way to work together so that all may be blessed.

As we journey onward into the fullness of this summer season, we acknowledge there is yet more light needed in our world. There are so many in our world who don't feel the abundance of life force that this season entails, it is a season they have not felt was made for them, for others maybe, but not for them. So many feel just dry desert and parched throats, for they do not know love and human kindness. For those discriminated against, for the color of their skin, because of whom they love, for how they experience their own gender, for their nation of origin, for the lack of money or wealthy they possess, or for the way their bodies manifest illness or disease, we pray that we may come to always be a source of love and care for them. God bless them and keep them, and help us all to work to change hearts and minds that would choose to oppress, abuse, and even take the life of those who some too easily and readily put into the category of "other," but who are indeed are siblings in Christ.

There are so many among us, in our community, and in the world in need of your healing compassion and care – grant all in need an experience of your renewing touch, especially...

We hold in our prayers today especially those living in facilities that are in lock down, and those for whom the isolation is weighing on their mental and emotional well-being. Bless them and all of us with your healing compassion and care.

Silent prayer/meditation

God, whose warm and loving care we rely so much on, especially not in days of struggle and confusion and worry, help us as we carry our personal loads. And then, with our burdens lightened even a little, may we be inspired to help lighten the load of others, so that we may freely walk with the one we call Savior, who taught us to pray to you, saying, **Our Father, ...**