

**Matthew 9:35-10:23 (NRSV)**

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.

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Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

I know that the Day of Pentecost is traditionally considered to be the birthday of the church, as tongues of fire danced over the disciples' heads and all of those visitors heard the Good News in their own languages and the curse of the Tower of Babel, the estrangement of the world's peoples because of their differences in language was reversed. Pentecost is wonderfully rich in symbolism. But for understanding the mission and the work of the church, it is hard to beat today's Gospel reading.

Jesus has been walking through the countryside, preaching and teaching and healing. And he's filled with compassion for the people because they are harassed and helpless. Their country is occupied by the Romans, their leaders don't protect them, they are poor and sick and lost. And so Jesus prays for them that the Lord of the harvest would send out laborers, because the time is right and the need is great.

And then Jesus answers his own prayer. Imagine this moment if you can. The disciples have been following him around for a while, they've seen and heard what he has done and said. And so he turns around and says, "All right, Bob and Joe and Sally. I have some good news and some better news. The good news is that God is answering our prayer for laborers. The better news is that you're the answer. Carolyn, I want you to take Huntingtown, Angie you take Dunkirk," and so on.

And he sends them out, with a very strange mix of power and dependence. They have authority over unclean spirits, to cure every disease and every sickness. And yet they have no money, no luggage, no staff to protect themselves with, they are barefoot and don't have a change of clothes. They can work miracles, but they need a place to stay. They can cure every sickness, but need to beg for food. They have unique gifts, but few resources. They are the church, with all of the wonderful gifts and graces and all the faults and deficits that the church has always had and still has today.

This week it has been my privilege to see the church at work in different contexts. On Thursday, I went down to the Synod Assembly at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia, and got to see the church at work. And it was wonderful to see what all of the various congregations in the Metro DC Synod are doing. There are multi-cultural congregations, new mission starts in Fairfax County and La Plata, there are young adult ministries springing up in various places (including here at Saint Nicholas), there are new youth ministries, there is just a wide variety of things going on. Our new bishop, Bishop Graham, is bringing a lot of new energy and it's great to see. I'm sure Glenn and Ann Wolfgang will be willing to talk about the assembly at the Sermon Exchange in the Fellowship Hall today.

But, I confess that I rushed home from the Synod Assembly to see the church at work in a second way, at the Relay for Life this

Friday into Saturday morning. Here were a bunch of us from Saint Nicholas walking around the track at Calvert High School, raising money for cancer research and treatment, but also witnessing to our faith and to the love of God. Just like the church in today's Gospel lesson, we didn't have much money, but we figured if we showed up and did what we were supposed to do that money would come. We didn't have changes of clothes – we did have shoes, may God be praised – but we did have each other to lean on a little.

See, the church is the church at all times, and at some times we need to be looking inward doing the work that we did at the Synod Assembly, to remember again who our Lord is and what our Lord calls us to do and to be and so we organize and discuss and pray and vote in order to discern God's will for us. That's what we do on Sundays and in Synod Assemblies and Congregational Meetings. But the church also needs to be the church outside its doors. The church is the church of today's Gospel reading when it is giving itself away, to cancer victims and their families. The church is the church of today's Gospel reading when it opens its doors to young people who are mourning the loss of their friends, the way we did when we held that prayer vigil for Aly and Ryan Purvis. The church is the church of today's Gospel reading when we go out to work camp or Christmas in April or Tree of Angels.

Isn't it interesting that in the Gospel lesson today, the church doesn't invite people to come to it – instead it goes to them? And the church goes with what it has to offer, but also asking for the support of its community. And, doing these things together, at the same time, is difficult to wrap our heads around. First, and especially as Lutherans, we are reluctant to go out into the world saying that we are something special, that we bring healing, we bring relief from demons and evil spirits, we bring the word of life. But it's also hard to go out into the world needy, saying we need your help in order to offer our gifts. For some of us, it is easier to

give, for others it is easier to receive, but we are called, actually to do both, to give and to receive.

On the one hand, we are called to be as innocent as doves. We aren't the world's experts – we know only Christ and him crucified. We aren't experts in economics or medicine or law or politics. But on the other hand, we are also called to be wise as serpents. We aren't economists but we know that people need money to live. We aren't doctors but we know people need healing. We aren't lawyers but we know people need justice. We aren't politicians but we know that in human communities people need to care for one another. And so we learn to be advocates and people of conscience, wise as serpents in the ways of the world because Jesus doesn't want us to be apart from that world, but rather to be a voice in and for the world. Some Christians and some churches decide that they need to be apart from the world, not to be soiled or degraded by it, but that's not what today's Gospel is telling us. Today's Gospel tells us that the mission of the church is in and for the world, giving ourselves away, healing sickness and division, seeking God's guidance and doing God's work. And that's why, no matter what money troubles we run into that I hope we never go back to giving less than 10 percent to benevolence.

One final thought – today's Gospel lesson tells us the names and a bit about the apostles. And so we meet Matthew, the tax collector, a man who probably owes his job to the Romans. And we also meet Simon the Cananaean – Cananaean means “nationalist” or “Zealot” – a person who is devoted to driving the Romans out of Palestine. How can these two people get along? Probably they didn't talk politics a lot, or disagreed a lot if they did. But the church is large enough to hold both of these two, not because the church doesn't stand for anything, but rather because it does. The church stands for God's love for the world, shown in Christ to all the world, yes, even the Romans as it turns out, and even to tax collectors.

And so, here we are at the end of all the ages, the answer to Jesus' prayer. We don't have enough money or resources. We have no weapons to protect ourselves. We're not even always certain we know what we're supposed to do. We go out as sheep among wolves, into a world where brothers betray brothers and parents and children argue and can't get along, and all we have is the Good News that we've been given, a healing word that we are told to give away for free because that's how we received it. I'd say we've got Satan right where we want him.

Amen.