

## Pentecost 2 – Proper 6 – Year A – 2020

The past two Sundays have been “feasts” – We celebrated Pentecost two weeks ago, with John’s account of Jesus breathing on the disciples, saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit” – giving the disciples and us the power to forgive and to embrace – and telling us, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you...” Last Sunday, Trinity Sunday, we heard an account of the Great Commission: go to all nations...

This Sunday we begin the long stretch of “Sundays after Pentecost” – or what many call “Ordinary” time. But hearing today’s gospel, it’s almost as if the readings for these three Sundays were arranged to give us different perspectives on the same message: We are sent out. We are called by God, and we are sent out.

In our first reading from Exodus this morning, we heard God’s call to the people of Israel – God’s reminder that they were in a covenant with God, and that they were to be a “priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” - And while the Israelites answered, “Everything that the Lord has spoken, we will do,” we know how well that worked out.

Unfortunately, too often that and similar passages have been taken, by those in power, as an indication that God is on “their” side – or “our” side – “our” being the dominant culture of the time. We assume that we ARE a holy nation – just by who we are. – The *truth* is, we are called to BE – to BECOME a holy nation...a holy people.

Listen to what Jesus says in today’s Gospel: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Another translation reads, “they were distressed and dispirited.”

The people with whom Jesus associated were those distressed and dispirited ones.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them. Compassion – feeling *with* them. *These* are the people of the covenant... these are the “holy nation” – these harassed and helpless folks are the ones Matthew tells us, in the Sermon on the Mount, are “blessed,” not the privileged class, not the ones who thought they were a holy nation.

After telling the disciples to pray that more laborers will be sent to the harvest, Jesus then calls his *twelve disciples* – and gives them authority to do what he has been doing – casting out unclean spirits, healing every disease. And thereafter, these 12 are called *apostles* –

which means ones who are sent. Jesus essentially commissions them to do what he has been doing. Remember how Jesus described his mission in Luke's gospel, quoting Isaiah: "God has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, to restore sight to the blind, to proclaim God's favor..."

I want us to look at these 12 disciples-become-apostles. They are named for us – and they include mostly illiterate laborers, a despised tax collector – otherwise known as a Roman collaborator, a Zealot – here called a Canaanite but who we might call a militant protestor, one man who will deny him, one who will be labeled a doubter, and one who will betray him. These common, uncredentialed, and lower-class folks are the ones who are called to carry out the mission of God as Jesus – another common, uncredentialed, lower-class man - has been doing...

Then note where Jesus sends them in this moment – not to Samaritan towns, not to Gentiles – but to their own folk. [Jesus *will* send them beyond their own tribe later – we heard that last week in the Great Commission to go out to *all* the nations, but that will come later.] And I don't think the mission Jesus gives them is hyperbole. He *expects* them to, "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." And then he clinches his sales pitch with a description of the payout these apostles can expect, being sent as sheep into the midst of wolves: Being handed over and judged by the dominant authorities, risking the dissolution of family – so important in their Jewish tradition – being hated by all.

One has to wonder why anyone would follow this man, why any of his disciples would take up the commission to bring good news to the poor, cure the sick, cast out demons, knowing what might be in store for them. I think they responded, they went out on their mission, because they had experienced *from Jesus* the healing of their *own* illnesses; *their* eyes had been opened; their *own* demons of self-loathing or doubt or fear had been cast out; *they* had been raised from death at the hands of those who were oppressing them; the leprosy of their *own* low status had been healed when Jesus called them "blessed."

You know what's coming next. It's that "We, too, are called," line. It's always true. And I have even said before that it will cost us. But this week I have thought long and hard about one question. It's a question one of my retreat directors asked me long ago: What are you afraid you will have to let go of if you respond to God's call? What are you afraid you will lose if you say "yes" to that commission to bring good news to the poor, to cure

the sick, to cast out demons, to raise the dead? What will it cost me? What might have to die in me, in order for there to be new life?

I cannot heal the sick, I say. Ah, but what should I be doing to assure that *everyone* who is sick can get the care they need to be healed? I cannot raise the dead, I say – but I know there are those whose isolation or depression makes them *feel* as good as dead, those who are “distressed and dispirited.” What am I doing to raise them from that death? I cannot cleanse lepers... but I can make an effort to stop avoiding those who are *treated* as lepers. I can even, perhaps, speak the good news to someone that *feels* like a leper that they are a leper no more. And as for casting out demons... I can choose to call out evil when I see it. I can replace the demonic hatred and divisiveness that seems to permeate the air we breathe with a spirit of acceptance and hope and love.

The late Episcopal priest and author Katherine Merrell Glenn had this to say about today’s gospel: “Jesus is sending us out to do the work that springs from a heart filled with compassion, with empathy, with doing our best to experience another’s pain. We can never reach this ideal, of course; each person’s pain is unique. But the heart of the compassionate Christ, which is and must be our own corporate heart, has no place for criticism, for judgment, even for merit. We help those who need help, not those we deem worthy of our help. It is not our own help we offer, of course; we are merely the vehicles for Christ’s healing touch, his saving grace, his Word of hope.”<sup>i</sup>

Our collect for today is worth holding onto and praying again and again:  
Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion.

May it be so.

[Exodus 19:2-8a](#)  
[Psalm 100](#)  
[Romans 5:1-8](#)  
[Matthew 9:35-10:8\(9-23\)](#)

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<sup>i</sup> Katherine Merrell Glenn “We Have So Many Ways...” <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/we-have-so-many-ways-proper-6-2002>