

READY OR NOT

Jesus is pretty clear in our story today. Go ... heal ... proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. Up until now, Jesus is the only one offering all the healing and curing and raising of the dead, but in his travels, he sees that so many people are in trouble. I sought out a few different interpretations of this text and found that the people are described as distressed, harassed, helpless, and even having 'fainted'. The clearest interpretation I found was that the people were distressed and scattered, even scattered abroad. Let's be reminded that for the people in the communal culture of Jesus' time, being scattered, not being together, would have been extremely distressful. In any event, they were like 'sheep without a shepherd', the scripture says.

Because they were scattered and 'like a sheep without a shepherd', one might think that Jesus would take us down the 'Good Shepherd' road to explain how to help. It's a good analogy. The Hebrew Bible prophesies that the coming Messiah would be like a good Shepherd; all the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, describe the Good Shepherd. But now, Jesus calls, not for more shepherds, but for more labourers, more workers. And not just any workers, but workers who have a sense of their salvation, not by works, but by the grace of God.

Up until now, Jesus has been the only one on this mission of healing, curing, and driving out demons. Now, he sees that "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few", so he calls the disciples to become apostles. Jesus calls his followers and learners – the word is disciples, to be the ones 'sent out' – the new word is 'apostles'. He calls the 'students' to become his partners in this mission of healing.

He sent out a specific group, the twelve; gave them "authority over unclean spirits, and the ability to cure every disease and every sickness"; and with this instruction, sent them off to save God's world:

"Proclaim the good news that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons."

Ready or not ... go!

To back up a little ... At this time in the church calendar, called the Common Time in our Lectionary, we are given more scripture choices than in the rest of the year. We could read through all six of the readings, because they are fabulous, but we tend to choose a partial list. This week, I chose the Genesis reading because I love God's miracle for Sarah – all is possible with God; and I love to share that Sarah laughs, then denies that she laughs. But God says, "Yes you did laugh", and seems genuinely ok with her laughing.

Genesis tells us that God is all about our whole humanity. Actually, God knows more about our humanity than we probably know about ourselves... thank God.

That “God knows us best” also comes up in the possible alternative reading of the Torah’s Exodus 19. In that text, God instructs Moses, as the people of Israel are wandering in the desert after their release from slavery in Egypt.

“This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴ ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’

We are told that the people responded to this news with, “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.”

What? “We will do?” That made them think they could be ‘priests and a holy nation’?

These people had been slaves for about four hundred years. They had been oppressed and beaten, underfed and overworked. They had not led anything, or governed anything, or even made decisions for themselves for ... what ... twelve generations or so? Priests? A holy nation? God had high hopes for these ‘slaves’.

Now, Jesus says, “go heal”, gives these students ... newly the ones to be sent out ... ‘all the authority’ and sends them off.

Not long before this, the disciples were asking, “what kind of man is this?” They were uncertain about the reality of Jesus. They were fairly new students of the Rabbi and possibly felt they had a long way to go to truly understand what Jesus was and what Jesus was talking about.

But , “Go and heal”, said Jesus.

God, through Jesus Christ, has high hopes for us.

“Be priests, be holy, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons!”

What? we say... WE’RE NOT READY!

But, God is so in love with us, God is so certain of our abilities, the abilities of God’s own creation, that God doesn’t seem to recognize, or perhaps chooses to ignore, our lack of trust in ourselves.

“I think I need more Bible study” ... NO ... just go heal!

“I think I need to be wiser” ... NO ... just go heal!

“I think I need to practice” ... NO ... just go heal!

We don't need more time, or more money, or more studying, or more armour, or more wisdom, we just need to go and heal.

Paul tells us, in Romans 5, verses 1&2 that we can hear the call because:

“... we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”

We can hear because we have acknowledged, in faith, the grace of God in our lives. Matthew reminds us, “We have received without payment, so we must give without payment”.

The basic calling of the church of Christ is to be disciples of Christ; to lead a life of discipleship. The Great Commission, “Go make disciples of all nations”.

Exodus tells us how ... be priests, be holy. Matthew tells us how ... Go heal by kicking out demons.

Can we heal like Jesus? Yes, through Christ, our kindness heals, our compassion heals, our love heals.

We, the church, exist for those who are helpless and scattered. The church exists for those who are not members in Christ. Our job, our only job, our most holy job, is to make a difference in God's world. All of us – facing outward, go make more disciples. Not because we want to put more people in our pews, not in judgement or sadness or pity but because the love and compassion of God moves us to do so.

This is the path for our work in partnership with God.

We don't need to worry if people are repentant because that's for God.

We don't need to worry that people are being good Christians or what denomination of Christian they are or even if they are Christians at all because that's for God.

OUR job is to go heal, proclaiming that the healing Kingdom of Heaven is near.

Are we ready? Do we feel capable? Do we feel that we have 'authority'? Not most days. Will we suffer? Will be uncomfortable? Will we question our motives? Will we feel foolish sometimes? Oh yes, but we'll be safe in our partnership with Christ because we know the hope of the Kingdom of Heaven.

It doesn't matter that we're not ready because God has unending faith in us and we need to JUST GO HEAL.

READY OR NOT

I finish this message today with an excerpt from a poem by Sister Ruth Fox, of the Order of Saint Benedict (1985)

May God bless you with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
So that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them
And turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness
To believe that you can make a difference in the world,
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.

Amen