

Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 14, 2020
Matthew 9:35 - 10:23
Pr. Sherman Bishop
Trinity Lutheran Church, Vermilion

Following Jesus: Expectations and Surprises

It has been three weeks since I prepared a sermon, and a lot has happened in that time. On May 24th Pr. Marianne Powrie brought us the word. On Pentecost Sunday we heard from Bishop Allende. Last Sunday, Trinity Sunday and our anniversary, we heard from Bishop Elizabeth Eaton. All of that means of course, that you didn't hear from me.

In the intervening weeks we left the season of Easter and are now in what the church calls Ordinary Time, but life doesn't seem anything like "ordinary".

During this same period George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, and in the aftermath of yet another extrajudicial killing of a black man at the hands of the police in this country people all over the nation rose up and said "enough is enough". The cry of "I can't breathe" has now been heard in cities around the world, and what seems surprising to many is that the demonstrations against this sort of brutality the crowds are, for the first time, truly multi-racial. If polls are to be believed people across the political spectrum are in agreement that something has to change. There may not be agreement on how to tackle those necessary changes, but the sentiment that we cannot again sweep this issue under the rug appears to be a new element in our national conversation.

All of that happened, and it happened in the midst of the continuing threat from the Novel Coronavirus that has not gone away.

This is the context of our moment in time when we are called to be the Body of Christ in this world. Today we hear a reading from Matthew that is the beginning of a teaching moment Jesus held with his disciples around just that question. For the next three weeks we will read our way through that instructional session, and while we do so I hope and pray that you will open yourself to what Jesus has to say, and imagine with all the freedom that is yours in Christ, what following Him might look like for you, here and now, on the shore of Lake Erie.

The starting place for this teaching time is what motivates Jesus.

Matthew tells us that Jesus has been active in the cities of the Galilee: proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of heaven, curing every disease and every sickness.

He does this out of "compassion" for those he sees. That word does not mean he feels sorry for them. The root is that he sees their plight, the situation of their living and is

willing to join them in their suffering, to battle against all that is not representative of the Kingdom of Heaven.

So diseases are not reflective of the Reign of God, and they are cured.
Illnesses are not compatible with the Reign of God, so they are healed.
Bondage to systems that are demonic, evil and life denying is broken and those suffering under them set free.

It is important to keep that in mind. Because what Jesus has done is what Jesus will charge his followers to do. Our job description is the same as was his, even, as we will hear when we read the last part of this teaching on June 28th, is the detail about picking up a cross to follow the Christ.

Duty, obligation, what we as Lutherans call “the law” will not be enough to sustain us in doing this work. What must fuel our efforts is a love for God and for neighbor, a love that allows us to see the suffering of others and have compassion for them, as Jesus had compassion for the people of the Galilee.

Now, I want to say something about the very nature of the community that is called to do this work of changing the world.

Before Matthew gets on with the teaching of Jesus, he pauses to write a list of those twelve who were the first to be sent.

I will confess to you that when I am reading the Bible and come across a list of names it is very easy to just gloss over them and move onto what seems to be “more important”. A list of names after all, especially when we don’t know the story behind them, and when many of them are really hard to pronounce, well they are easy to dismiss.

But those who wrote the Bible put down those lists for a reason. In fact, I am more convinced than ever, at this point in my life, that those lists are often strategic in their placement and purpose.

Let me illustrate in this way if I might. If you listen to the protest gatherings happening around the country you will of course hear cries of, “I can’t breath”, and “Get you knee off our necks” and calls for actions to dismantle the systems that allow racism to remain a threat to people of color. But you will also hear another call and response litany.

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| “Say his name.” | <i>George Floyd</i> |
| “Say his name” | <i>Ahmaud Arbery</i> |
| “Say her name” | <i>Breanna Taylor</i> |
| and especially here in the Cleveland area | |
| “Say his name” | <i>Tamir Rice</i> |

That litany of names is to remind all who will listen that behind the story, behind the statistic is, or was a human being. A man, woman or child with their own story to write,

the ending erased by a violent death. Real people. That's the point of lists of names, to help us see that they were real people. People with whom we might identify.

Twelve names are on Matthew's list. Some are very familiar to us, Simon, who became known as Peter and his brother Andrew. We hear the stories of James and John, the brothers of a fisherman father. And of course we know the name of Judas Iscariot because of his betrayal.

Other names are less familiar to us, and of those I want to lift up two. They are in fact the two names offered with a modifier to help us place them.

Matthew, the Tax Collector and Simon the Cananaean. These two are worth thinking about as we contemplate what it means to be a community of Christ's disciples today.

The political context for the world of Jesus' ministry is that of Roman occupation, dominance and exploitation. In Matthew and Simon we have two stores diametrically opposed to how they chose to live in that world.

Matthew collaborated with the occupation. He might have said, "The Romans are not going away, so I might as well find a way to work with them and take care of #1". He participated in the "system" of the empire, collecting taxes from his neighbors, ingratiating himself with the authorities, and making his life as comfortable as possible. He was likely rich by community standards, rich in money that is, but likely poor in friends.

Simon, known as the Cananaean was the opposite. The word "Cananaean" is the Aramaic word for "Zealot". In the lists of the disciples found in Mark and Luke he is referred to as "Simon the Zealot". The Zealots were a group committed to opposing the Romans. Their rhetoric was that of a nation restored under a Davidic King. Their actions were most often passive resistance and resentment, though occasionally they could erupt into violent attacks against Roman interests.

Someone like Matthew would have cause to be afraid of someone like Simon.

Yet here they are. From opposite ends of the political and ideological spectrum of their day, they are named among the 12, both members of the inner circle of Jesus disciples. Both receptive of the same teaching, both charged with the same ministry, both sent out with the same marching orders.

For each of them, the "new" vision of Jesus for life in the Kingdom was enough to cause them to give up their "old" choices for life in a world they preferred. It was apparently enough for them to work together. Enough for them to live together. Was it even enough for them to become friends with one another? Just what was it that could effect such a change of world view and ideology?

To use the language of Paul that we heard in Romans 5, it was “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given us.”

When Matthew and Simon gave themselves to that love, to that vision, to that mission they helped to change the world.

The urgency for such a change is no less today than it was then.

There is not agreement today in most churches, and Trinity is included in that, as to what to make of, and how to respond to, the challenges roiling through out society. We who are of European dissent have great difficulty even talking about the very idea of white privilege and how it contributes to the suffering of people of color. The question for us to ask is, “will that difficulty prevent us from following Jesus?”.

Can one who believes truth is reflected in the commentaries of FOX news, and one who believes truth is reflected in the commentaries of MSNBC find a stronger bond through our baptism into the death of Christ, and Jesus’s vision of the Kingdom of Heaven?

We need to be clear about this. Understanding the world from Jesus’ perspective is not optional. Seeing others with compassion and love rather than suspicion and hate is not optional. At the end of this teaching section Jesus will utter what is so often heard as an unbearably harsh word, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” (Mt. 10:37).

We can add, “Whoever loves Trump or Biden more than me is not worthy of me.”.

We are called to more than our fears or self interest. We are called to more than our ambitions and ideologies. We are called to be the people of God, the Body of Christ, a force that brings about changes in this world wrought from love, grace and mercy. We are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, and as such it is the values of the Reign of God that guide and empower us. If we begin as Matthew the Tax Collector, or Simon the Zealot, we can become Matthew and Simon, disciples of Jesus, sent and trusted to bear witness to a new world. Indeed we must become those witnesses, and we must know that the difference we are called to make, we are called to make it together.