

Slim Pickings

A sermon preached by

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Matthew 9:35 - 10:23

³⁵Then 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. ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

My first pastoral assignment fresh out of seminary was a two-point charge (that means two small separate churches) outside of the big town of Paw Paw in Southwest Michigan. The congregations were like night and day in almost every way that you could conceive of differences. To say that I struggled with the smaller, township church would be putting it mildly. But then again they certainly struggled with me as well. Fresh out of seminary I was bound and determined to get these folks on the path of liturgical renewal. So when Holy Week rolled around I told them (I didn't suggest, I told, I know that might be shocking to you!) that we were going to have a foot washing service on Maundy Thursday.

Well first of all, they had never had a Maundy Thursday service and second of all I'm pretty certain that none of these good folks had ever, ever taken off their work boots, socks, or hose in front of each other, let alone some fresh-faced pastor. The night came. It was the kind of church that if the doors opened, they would be there, like it or not. The regular worshipping crowd of about 30 showed up and because they were so gracious they did as they were told. But the discomfort in the room was absolutely palpable and I resolved right then and there that I needed to understand my context before I tried to shove first century church practices down the throats of hard working farmers.

I think that every new pastor ought to make the 9th and 10th chapters of Matthew required reading before they set out to force good church people to do stuff that makes them blush. Matthew will certainly disabuse any rookie pastor from thinking their words and their actions will be received with open and unquestioning arms. In these chapters that are sometimes called the missionary discourse, Matthew lays it on pretty thick about the resistance that the disciples

are going to meet. “The laborers are few...I’m sending you out into the midst of wolves, brother will betray brother, flee from one town to the next.” The list goes on and on. Sounds like a great Father’s Day text doesn’t it!

The truth of the matter is of course that almost everything in our lives that is worth doing isn’t easy. Whether it is being a disciple of Jesus, being a father or partner or good worker or faithful friend...everything in life that is worth doing is, at least sometimes, going to be hard.

This morning we are electing leadership here in the church. Our nominating committee has been diligently at work over the last couple of months. We’ve had about 40 to 45 openings in our committee and service life to fill. With only nine of us on the committee the work is sometime discouraging or difficult, because it isn’t easy to be told on multiple occasions, no I can’t help right now. And the tendency is to back pedal, to minimize the task, to tell people, the role I’m asking you to fill isn’t all that difficult or time consuming. Sometimes that may be true, but often I think we just aren’t confronting the reality that yes, sometimes stuff is hard. You might wonder why in the world you are doing something, but that may in fact be the definition of discipleship. In effect Jesus tells his disciples, you are going to suffer, there won’t be enough workers, it is slim pickings out there, and you will wonder what in the world you were thinking.

It is almost as if to confirm this reality that Matthew lists the litany of powers designated to the apostles. These could double for Jesus’ own resume: “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” Jesus not only sends them out with power to authenticate the kingdom's nearness but to announce it by using the very same words as their teacher: “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” In Matthew, Jesus’ followers include us as well as the original audience. We are expected to resemble him in word and deed. So in this way, to be sent *by* Jesus is, in some sense, to be sent *as* Jesus.

That pretty much confirms what I’ve been saying this morning. To be a disciple, to be sent as Jesus, isn’t all that easy. In fact at times it is altogether sacrificial.

As some of you know, during Lent I decided to stop using Facebook for that season. It wasn’t an easy decision for a number of reasons. I’m a pretty competitive guy, so leaving over 800 friends is difficult. I liked to think up silly things to post. After a while my life on Facebook was one sight joke after the next. And I truly miss learning about some of the things that are going on in your lives. A death, a surgery, a job loss...they all came to my phone when I was connected like this. So, it is not surprising to know that we live in a world of both unprecedented

connection and unmitigated isolation. Those things like Facebook that have sought to monetize our longing for community have at the same time become the place in which we most often tear ourselves apart. Facebook's follow/unfollow feature allows us to feel like we are connected with hundreds, even thousands of "friends" while actually living in an echo chamber of our own ideologies.

Each succeeding social media platform comes into existence so young people can escape being "followed" by their parents and grandparents. Even my own mom at 91 was asking why I was at this or that place! In the end, our plight is worse than the crowd that followed Jesus because we are not only being divided by outside forces, but often it is we ourselves who work to define ourselves against something or someone. At some point, I have to wonder, will we wake up one day and realize that we are like sheep without a shepherd, faint hearted, helpless, and despondent?

So, I've continued to stay away from Facebook, mostly as an exercise in being present. To be more careful about my reactions to people and ideologies. To form my own opinions, hopes and desires without so much background noise. It isn't perfect. Sometimes Nora has to tell me something that I missed, or Jane will write me about the death of a colleague as she did on Friday...but for me now, in this time and season of my life, it seems to be working.

Jesus' reaction to the crowd in search of hope is to commission his disciples, and by extension us, to offer hope, but as we learn from the various Gospel narratives, more often than not, we are the same flock of harassed and helpless sheep to which we are sent. Despite our ongoing need for a Savior to show us the Kingdom of God, we are called to help others find their way to Jesus. Sometimes, it will be us showing them the Kingdom. At other times, perhaps they will be the light of hope for us. Ultimately, the cure for the hopelessness of division and faint heartedness is a community of compassion, faith, and love that can remind us, with regularity, that the Kingdom of God is as near as a relationship in Christ with each other.

At times the pickings do seem slim, but our hope and affirmation is that they will be more than enough. May it be so. AMEN