

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Lectionary 11 (A)  
June 14, 2020  
Text: Matthew 9:35—10:23

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Jesus looked out on the crowds, and he had compassion for them. He saw how they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. And I'm certain that as the risen Christ looks out on our country, with protests against racial injustice in the streets of cities everywhere, with deep grief over the lasting impacts of systemic racism in our country, and with profound economic uncertainty due to the Coronavirus hitting the poor and communities of color especially hard—I'm certain that Christ looks on us with compassion too.

In the first century, Jesus saw his people struggling under the thumb of Roman rule, subject to all the daily indignities of living under foreign occupation. They were forced to witness the daily displays of Roman power, with heavily armed troops parading through the streets and the bodies of those deemed to be a threat to Roman rule hanging from crosses outside the city walls. The people were even forced to fund their own oppression by paying Roman taxes, and they were liable to Roman conscription to serve as forced labor for the Roman army. And worse still, they were also exploited by their own people. The Jerusalem elites, both the family of King Herod and the temple priesthood, extracted their own taxes and confiscated the land of the poor who couldn't pay.

Jesus saw poverty and deep suffering, and he had compassion for the people. So he sent his followers out to be agents of his work of healing and freedom. Jesus sent them out to be emissaries of the reign of God—or to use Matthew's words, the kingdom of heaven. The reign of God is human community organized as if God were in charge rather than Caesar. The reign of God is human relationships shaped by God's values of forgiveness and reconciliation, generosity and inclusive community, rather than me-first and watch-your-back and us-versus-them. And here's the essential part of Jesus' wisdom: it is possible to live as a community in anticipation of the reign of God, even while Caesar is in power, and to do so is to experience a profound sense of healing and freedom. And it's possible for us as well, no matter how much turmoil is going on around us, no matter who the president is—we can live together in anticipation of the reign of God, and experience God's power for healing and freedom.

Jesus sent his followers to share the reign of God, to represent Jesus' compassion, in villages and towns all around the country. And it's important to note how he sent them. He gave the some very specific instructions—to take no money, no traveling bag, extra clothes or sandals, and no staff. Those instructions were given to signal that Jesus' followers had rejected the human family's devotion to wealth, status and violence. They were devoted instead to God's values of community and sharing, recognizing every person as a beloved child of God. They were about healing the human family. The instructions Jesus gave were very specific to the culture of his homeland in the first century, but they are adaptable to our time and our place. And if we can unpack what those instructions meant to Jesus' followers in the first century, it will help us see more clearly how to be representatives of Jesus' compassion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

When Jesus sent his followers out without money, it was more than just a sign they weren't devoted to wealth. It was so they would need other people. They would need strangers who would receive them as guests. And in return, Jesus' followers would share a glimpse of Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness and love of enemies. They would share an experience of the kind of healing and freedom that comes from living in the reign of God.

I wonder whether we are living through a time when, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we're becoming more aware of how we need other people. We need to be connected, to not be isolated from each other. One of our council members shared this week how he's been noticing, while taking walks in his neighborhood, that people are a little friendlier. They'll greet strangers, maybe even stay and visit a bit—while keeping at least six feet of separation, of course. What if we felt we really needed to be in relation with all sorts of people, not just people like us? American culture is deeply segregated. Race and wealth and class keep us separated. What if we felt we really needed each other? What if we felt a need to be community together, where we could share Jesus' way of compassion and humility, and forgiveness and generosity? I wonder how those relationships might become part of God's great work for healing and wholeness.

When Jesus sent his followers out without a travel bag, extra clothes or sandals, it was more than just a sign they weren't devoted to possessions and signs of status. It was also so they wouldn't be mistaken for powerful or affluent people. One of the consistent themes of Jesus' teaching is that a desire for wealth and status can be spiritually dangerous. It can rob us of the kind of freedom and joy God wants for us.

I wonder whether we are living through a time when, because of the pandemic and because of the protests following the murder of George Floyd, we're becoming more aware of how devoted to wealth our culture is, and how unequally and unfairly access to the essentials for life have been distributed. In the US, white families have, on average, ten times the net worth of black families. This is a consequence of slavery, and Jim Crow, and redlining and over-policing. It's the result of a generations-long web of laws and policies and attitudes that limit access of black families to jobs and housing and health care. And while undoing centuries of wrong isn't something the church alone can accomplish, I believe people of faith have an important role to play—the role of being directed by Jesus' values, recognizing every person as children of God and hearing the call of justice. For white people, I think it's especially important to be allies, but not to come down from on high with a plan to fix everything. Our role right now calls for humility, for listening and learning, for supporting the efforts of those who are already deeply involved in the work for justice. I wonder where we can give support and encouragement to the work of creating greater equality. I wonder what kind of social benefit and financial cost we will experience as a nation as we move toward a more just and fair distribution of wealth.

And last, when Jesus sent his followers out without a staff, it meant they were unarmed, because a staff was more than just a walking stick. It was also a weapon for self-protection. Not

carrying a staff meant refusing to buy into what the human family has pretty much always believed about violence—that violence works! But Jesus rejected every form of violence and retaliation. He saw them as part of the disease from which the human family needs healing. And so he sent his followers out defenseless, trusting in God to provide for them and care for them. Trusting in God does not create any magical protection for Jesus' followers, which means it requires true courage. But at least we won't be part of the problem. Instead, we can be part of something different, something life-giving.

I wonder whether we are living through a time when, because of the protests about police abuse expanding into protests against white supremacy, we can recognize the futility of violence. Jesus' way does not create victims. It is about nonviolently resisting the values of the world we live in—resisting violence, resisting every self-serving use of power, status and wealth, resisting everything that breaks down community and diminishes our sense of connection to each other. I wonder whether Jesus' rejection of violence can help us recognize the potential for violence in words, maybe especially words that come out of fear and defensiveness. I wonder whether we can find our way to not feeling a need to defend anything about our nation's past or present, but instead see with clear eyes both the good and bad. I wonder whether we can relinquish the need to be right, and the need to defend our virtue or justify ourselves (since God has already justified us by grace). I wonder how an undefended stance like that can help us find new neighbors, and create connections and community that benefit those who have previously been shut out.

Just as Jesus sent out Peter and Andrew, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew and all the others, so Jesus sends us now to represent God's way of love and peace and blessing that creates inclusive communities where there is healing and freedom. In our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, Jesus sends us to bring the reign of God into all our relationships. It's more than just treating other people with respect and dignity, although that is certainly important. It is also a matter of living together in a way that makes healing and freedom possible. It all starts with Jesus' compassion—with seeing the real-life predicaments our neighbors, and knowing they are also children of God; with seeing the real-life challenges our neighbors experience, and seeking to be partners in the work of justice and fairness. It all starts with the compassion Jesus has shown to us. Our hearts burn to share that compassion with our neighbors. Thanks be to God. Amen.