

Lectionary 11 (A)
June 18, 2023
Text: Matthew 9:35 - 10:8 (9-23)

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Jesus looked out over the people, and he had compassion for them because he saw how they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He saw how they were harassed by the heavy thumb of Roman rule and Roman exploitation. Roman taxes kept the people suffering in deep poverty. Their faith should have been a comfort to them, but instead the temple authorities were busy enriching themselves at the expense of the poor, and the so-called religious reformers, instead of focusing on the essentials of mercy and justice for the poor, were focused on religious purity laws.

There was only one thing to do. The problem was much bigger than Jesus alone could address, so he sent his followers out to represent him and his healing, forgiving, compassionate work—to embody the reign of God. Jesus sent them out to all the places he wasn't able to go himself with specific instructions on how to share what they had learned from him. What's most interesting to me is how, when we make appropriate adjustments to move Jesus' instructions from the first century to the 21st century, Jesus' vision and Jesus' wisdom can still speak to us with striking clarity about what it looks like to represent Jesus. And there are two parts to Jesus' instructions—things his followers should be doing to represent him and the reign of God, and things his followers should not be doing to represent him and the reign of God.

Jesus' followers should to be all about sharing life and blessing. We may or may not be gifted to "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleans the lepers [and] cast out demons," but I know how powerfully life-giving and freeing Jesus' forgiveness can be. I know how powerfully life-giving and freeing Jesus' unconditional love can be. As a community that is all about grace, all about recognizing every person as a child of God, not judging people according to race or social status or sexual orientation or gender identity, you are an oasis in a harsh and unforgiving land. To embody Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness and generosity and humility is to show the world what it needs most. The human family is so harassed by greed and violence and isolation and loneliness and fear. Only Jesus can set us lead us out of this prison the human family has created, and Jesus authorizes you to represent him and represent his way of love that creates welcome and belonging and peace.

There are also some things Jesus' followers should not be doing if they are going to effectively represent Jesus and the reign of God. Maybe think of it this way. There needs to be at least some degree of coherence or consistency between what we say and what we do and how we present ourselves. If the gap between those is too big, we simply won't be credible. For example, if someone were to attend a climate justice protest, but arrived in a big gas-guzzling Hummer, people might question their sincerity. Or if someone attended a racial justice event wearing a T-shirt with a Confederate flag on the front, they might be greeted with open hostility. Jesus understood that if our way of being doesn't match Jesus' message, we might be viewed as hypocrites, and we certainly won't be invited into respectful conversation or sharing neighborly community.

One thing Jesus tells his followers not to bring with them is a staff. In Jesus' time, a staff wasn't just a walking stick, it was a weapon. So representing Jesus includes rejecting violence just like Jesus did. I don't think that means Christians can't own a gun or go hunting, but it does mean that we need to be careful about how we present ourselves if we want to represent Jesus. Let me explain what I mean with a story. When I was in seminary, for a year or so I worked nights as a security guard. It was a great job because I had all night to read. But I also carried a gun while I made my rounds. I really don't imagine that anyone would have thought I was representing Jesus when I was wearing my holster and gun. What I think that means is that we will need to discern, for our setting, what is the best way to represent Jesus—nonviolently.

Jesus also told his followers to not take sandals or extra clothes or a bag. Translating across the centuries, I think that means that Jesus' representatives will be known by their simplicity of life and their refusal to let the drive for more and the attraction of wealth define their lives. Jesus is absolutely clear in his teaching that it is impossible to be devoted to God and to wealth, and that the attraction of wealth is spiritually dangerous. So Jesus' representatives don't flaunt their luxurious possessions. Instead, they live simply, humbly, generously. This might be one of the ways that representing Jesus is most out of step with the culture we live in. While our economy tries to sell us the con job that we can never have too much and we always need a little bit more, Jesus leads us to know how much is enough and to experience contentment.

Finally, Jesus tells his representatives to not take money, which I understand to be about independence. If Jesus' representatives have money, they might not need the hospitality of strangers. But that's exactly what Jesus wants his representatives to need. He wants them to be about making connections and creating community, and he's relying on the cultural sense of obligation in the first century to welcome strangers and provide for them. And in return, Jesus' representatives can share a glimpse of the healing power of Jesus' way of forgiveness and love. They would begin creating little Jesus communities in every village where they stopped. And Jesus' representatives now will also be all about welcome and hospitality and creating connections, not just here at church, but also in your neighborhood, your workplace. In a time when there is so much loneliness and isolation, Jesus' representatives are a sign that it doesn't have to be that way. We can belong to each other, support and care for each other.

Dear people of God, once we've made the leap from the first century to now, I think it turns out that being Jesus' representatives really isn't that complicated. With the way we live, we show how forgiveness and unconditional love heal lives and heal relationships and heal communities. And we try not to let the destructive things that color our culture shape our lives, especially violence and isolation and a desire for more. Instead, there's a genuine beauty and freedom about how Jesus' representatives live. And this is how we experience God's mercy and saving power, by being set free from all of the things that constrain and distort human lives. Jesus' love and forgiveness set us free. Jesus' way of compassion and humility open up our lives. Jesus' way of community gives us belonging and purpose. All of that is what makes your lives so very beautiful. Thanks be to God. Amen.