

June 3, 2018 – Journey Worship

TEXT: Matthew 9:35–10:8

TITLE: Call to Duty

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

This passage is the fourth of Jesus' five great discourses recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. In the preceding chapters Jesus delivers his Sermon on the Mount, turning conventional wisdom on its head when he declares that happy are those whom the world would deem as otherwise: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and those who are persecuted because of righteousness. After instructing all those who would hear him, Jesus sets about on his healing mission, again upsetting religious and conventional practices by healing a leper, Peter's mother-in-law sick with fever, a demoniac, a paralytic, eating at the home of a tax collector, setting free a woman who had been ill and ostracized by society for 12 years, restoring life to a daughter, healing two blind men and a someone who was mute.

If I use my sanctified imagination, I believe Jesus was physically and emotionally spent, overwhelmed by the great need of the people and crowds who followed him. Unlike some who think they alone can solve the world's issues, Jesus proclaimed to his disciples: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest." This passage of scripture has been one that I have loved for as long as I can recall. As a child, this passage pricked to my heart and although I couldn't fully grasp it's meaning, somehow it continually spoke to me and perhaps it was these few words that set me on the trajectory to a ministry of mission which began decades before I acknowledged and accepted God's call on my life to ministry. Prior to moving to Pittsburgh and being hired to implement outreach programs to the poor and disenfranchised in this community, I served as the assistant director and then director of two social service agencies in Indianapolis. At each of the two agencies we provided daily programming and services to families in crisis, seniors who needed someplace to gather and socialize, preschoolers whose parents couldn't afford market rate child care, people in recovering or fleeing abuse, and refugee families who were acclimating to a new country. I didn't realize all those years ago that I was responding to Jesus' call to go into the world and minister to the needs of the least of these.

In today's passage, Jesus summons twelve disciples, giving them authority to cast out unclean spirits, and to cure every disease and sickness and to proclaim the good news, the kingdom of heaven has come near. The kingdom of heaven has come near, it is here, right now, in this place was Jesus' message to his disciples, and it was now their call of duty to go forth and continue what Jesus had started, the spread of an uncompromising gospel, healing of those who are sick in body, mind and spirit and being the purveyors of social justice and equity within a society that ostracized anyone who was considered different, unclean, or less than. One commentator states: "Jesus had compassion on the people he met because they were 'harassed and helpless,' with no shepherd to guide them. Their social sphere was dismally distorted and no longer reflected God's intended purposes." (pg. 284)

A dismally distorted social sphere, no longer reflecting God's intended purposes. It seems the more things change, the more they stay the same—children snatched from the arms of parents seeking asylum in this country; racist and misogynistic rants; proposed rent increases for those living on the financial edge; the implementation of tax cuts that primarily benefit those who have; unequal educational opportunities for people living in the poorest communities; the implementation of tariffs that will negatively impact everyone and trigger costly trade wars—these are modern-day examples of the need for followers of Christ to cast out demons by calling to task those who have relinquished their authority to represent what's in the best interest of everyone; to heal the diseased by advocating for everyone to have access to affordable and equitable health care; to cleanse lepers by drawing near to people characterized as animals, criminals, deplorables; to raise the dead by speaking life into people and situations that have been given up as unredeemable, never going to amount to much, not worthy of another chance. The kingdom of God draws near, when the people of God stand up, speak out, and insist on that which is Godly: justice, equality, and equity. The Chronicler said it like this: if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (2: Chronicles 7:14).

Jesus cautioned the disciples: "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves." The restoration of God's intended world is risky and sometime dangerous business; we may experience bodily and/or emotional harm, or even death. Beloved, restoration of the kingdom of God requires selflessness, loving and choosing God's social order of full inclusion over personal gain or personal preservation. This doesn't mean we are to purposely make ourselves target for persecution, Jesus said, be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16b), using every opportunity, resource and tool for the glory of God. Jesus warned the apostles that they would be dragged before governors and kings because of him (Matthew 10:18). But Jesus promises to give them everything they would need, that in the most difficult circumstances "the spirit of God would speak through them (Matthew 10:20) and Jesus promised to be with them until the end of the age (Matthew 28:20b).

Our call to duty includes the promises that God will never leave nor forsake us and that the spirit of God goes before and with us and will speak for and through us. Therefore, we are not afraid to sign our names to petitions demanding that everyone, not just the rich and famous be ensured the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; demanding that those who are duly elected represent what's in the best interest of all the people of this country including those living in US territories; that people who have served their time be reintegrated back into society without the stigma or being branded as convicted felons; that we would seek to live peaceably with other countries in this world and not be so nationally focused that we ignore the fact that whatsoever we sow, that shall we reap; that those characterized as the least of these, expendables are the children of God; that those who come knocking on our doors seeking refuge be welcomed and not persecuted. Our call to duty is to seek justice and peace as God's plan for the world, not in the great by and by, but right now, for the kingdom of God has come near and includes all of God's children.

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God spoke: "The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress. And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land" (Ezekiel 22:29-30a). Beloved, as we gather at table this morning, and partake of bread and cup, may we feel God's presence, be emboldened and encouraged and be nourished and empowered physically, spiritually, emotionally to fulfill our collective and individual calls to duty to be the people of God, the embodiment of love, acceptance, justice and peace in this hurting world, standing in the gap, repairers of the breach in the name and power of Jesus for the harvest is plentiful, but laborers are few!

Amen.