

June 14, 2020

We've just read a good summary of what Jesus does... He is traveling to cities and villages, teaching, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, casting out demons and curing every disease and sickness. Jesus is teaching, proclaiming and healing is happening everywhere he goes...

In a sense, Jesus is bringing a little bit of heaven down to earth. And he see's crowds of people... Not a few people with a few needs here and there, but lots and lots of people with lots and lots of needs.

Jesus sees the crowds, he is overwhelmed, he has compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless. The weight of the human need was so enormous, Jesus organizes the very first ministry team. Jesus gathers the disciples and sends them out, and we read every single one of their names...

And in our baptism, our names have been added to that list of disciples. So, in a very real way, Jesus is also instructing us, "proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'"

Today, I'd like to do some reflecting on this mission trip. How do we proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near? And How are we a compassionate presence for people who are harassed and helpless?

If I were to ask each of you how you are harassed and helpless, my guess is that some of you might say, "not so much." And I get that, I know a lot of you are people who count your blessings. You like to focus on the positive. And I honor that. I try to do that...

But sometimes, life can be a little overwhelming. Especially in times like these... And as if dealing with the pandemic and the racial unrest wasn't enough, many of us could be dealing with alcoholism, or feeling a little depressed, or working hard and barely making ends meet, or having diabetes, or cancer, or living with the grief of losing a loved one, or worried about a job, or scared about financial security, concerned about a child, or being angry about our politics, or disappointed about the grain prices, or, you see, I could go on and on...

Truth is, all of us are in bondage to sin, we are sinners and we live with the consequences of sin and death around us all the time. To be sinners means we know what it's like to be harassed and helpless. And it doesn't matter whether you're the poorest person in the world or the richest, sin and death touches all of us.

Quick story... Working in a large church in Austin, home of Hormel, I've had the opportunity to hear stories of the Hormel strike back in '85. And to hear stories from the perspectives of executives as well as the stories from the rank and file P9ers.

Thirty-five years after the strike, for people who lived through it, it's still a raw nerve. I've had executives tell me about going to work, and being scared for their lives; being escorted by the national guard, driving together in cars and having people with bats yelling and screaming at them...

I've had people who worked on the lines tell me about sitting in the labor hall and hearing threats about crossing the picket line... I had a friend who worked on the kill floor, I did his funeral several years ago... He told me a story of protecting the labor hall from those who did cross the line... Union members fighting with each

other over the union... Harassed and helpless-- I think so... A community torn apart-- I think so...

When I would hear those stories, I often asked what was going on at the church. What was the senior pastor saying? What was the attendance like? And remarkably, they would have an answer. And usually along the lines of Pastor so and so, would not take a side, but would implore people to listen to one another...

It was always amazing to me, when everything in that community was tearing apart, it was the church itself that was keeping it together. And the miracle was, throughout that whole contentious strike, people on all sides continued to worship together.

Almost instinctively, they knew that the church was a different kind of place... A different kind of kingdom, a place for teaching, and healing and reconciliation. Although some people wouldn't talk with one another for the rest of their lives, they would come to worship, and even though they would sit far apart from one another, they were together in one very particular way.

The church is never a collection of perfect people, in a perfect kingdom. The church is always a collection of sinners-- confessing our sin, receiving forgiveness and working toward reconciliation. It's never perfect, it's always messy, and yet it is a sign of the Kingdom.

As we've already talked about, we really do know what it feels like to be harassed and helpless these days. And everything has become so political, and everyone has opinions about the hypocrisy of everyone else. Everybody pointing their fingers

and screaming at one another, and the louder the screaming, the more entrenched everyone becomes.

It's a bit of a powder keg... And you wonder if it's going to blow up even worse than it already has... And the louder all this rancor gets, the more obvious it becomes to me, that the church is needed now as much as ever before...

The good news today is that Jesus proclaims, "the Kingdom of heaven has come near." And we pray every Sunday, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We're not a perfect community by any means, we live with sin and death all around us. But in the death and resurrection of Jesus, transformation happens. We are forgiven, and so we forgive those who trespass against us. We are a different kind of community.

In this Body of Christ, we live by the commandment to love God and love our neighbors. Instead of crucifying others to get what we want, we crucify ourselves to love our neighbors, to understand people who are different.

This is the mission we share... Your name has been added to the list... Proclaim the good news, Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons... Go in peace, serve the Lord... And thanks be to God...

Amen...