

Scripture Reading for Sunday June 14 2020

Matthew 9:35-38 (NIV)

³⁵ Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

Matthew 10:5-15 (NIV)

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. ⁷ As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give. ⁹ “Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts— ¹⁰ no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep. ¹¹ Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave. ¹² As you enter the home, give it your greeting. ¹³ If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. ¹⁴ If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

Sermon: Commissioned by Christ

After Trinity Sunday, the Lectionary gospel readings revert back to the story of Jesus, this year from Matthew’s account, and methodically continues until Christ-the-King Sunday at the end of November. It’s a coincidence that on this Anniversary Sunday our reading is the instructions that Jesus gave to his disciples when he sent them out for the first time on their own on a mission trip. Recall the Nicene Creed describes the Church as “apostolic,” a Greek word that means “sent,” and in our reading Matthew uses the word “apostles” here for the *only* time in his gospel, indicating that Jesus has *commissioned* them - or *sent* them out - for a specific task. Last week our Gospel reading was the Great Commission from the end of Matthew. At that time, the *risen* Jesus said to his disciples: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples *of all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”¹ That bold directive is accompanied by a reassuring promise, that Christ’s presence will *always* be with us until the end of

¹ Matt 28:18-20.

time. The book of Acts, written by Luke, tells the story of how the Church spread from Jerusalem all the way to Rome. And 2000 years later, the Church has indeed made disciples of “all nations” and continues to welcome people into God’s family through baptism, and to teach Christ’s followers to obey everything that he taught us. St. Andrews has been a part of that heritage since 1828, 192 years ago, beginning as a mission field of the Church of Scotland.²

Before discussing the instructions Jesus gave to the apostles, I want to backtrack a bit and remind you what has happened in the previous few chapters. Matthew presents the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5 to 7, reminding them at the end to beware of false prophets who come as “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” and saying that “a tree will be known by its fruit.”³ Jesus also says that if we hear his words and act upon them, we will be like “a wise man who built his house upon the rock.”⁴ The crowds were amazed by his teaching and by the authority Jesus demonstrated.⁵ Chapters 8 and 9 then present a series of miracles and exorcisms that Jesus performed, so demonstrating what the good news of God’s kingdom (or reign) looks like in practice.⁶ Matthew reports that they were two reactions; the crowds were amazed and said, “Never has anything like this been seen in Israel.” Whereas the religious leaders said, “By the ruler of demons he casts out the demons.”⁷ Those leaders *refused* to admit that *God* was at work in Jesus. That’s because they were faced with a stark choice: either Jesus *was* God’s chosen Messiah or, at the very least, a great prophet, or else he was in league with the devil! It is in this context that Jesus recognizes the crowds are “like sheep without a shepherd.”⁸ Those words are an indictment against Israel’s religious (and political) leaders and Matthew’s readers would understand that phrase as referring to past prophetic condemnations of Israel’s shepherds by Ezekiel and Jeremiah.⁹ Ezekiel says that the leaders have looked after themselves, not their flock. They have *not* strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. They have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost.¹⁰ Consequently, the flock was scattered because there was no shepherd - and no one looked for them. Ezekiel then proclaims: “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: *I myself* will search for my sheep and look after them. *I will* search for the lost and bring back the strays. *I will* bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.” The irony is that Israel’s shepherds accuse Jesus of being in league with Satan, yet they should know Israel’s Scriptures and so recognize that Jesus is doing *precisely* what Ezekiel said God himself would do. By the way, this is *another* hint at the divinity of Jesus!¹¹ Jesus, then, becomes the good shepherd who

² For a brief history, see: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/gallery/>.

³ Matt 7:15-19.

⁴ Matt 7:24-27.

⁵ See also Matt 7:29; 9:6-8; 21:23-27; 28:18.

⁶ This illustrates a passing reference to Jesus’ ministry in Matt 4:17,23-25; see also Matt 9:35.

⁷ Matt 9:33-34.

⁸ Matt 9:36; a reference to Num 27:16-17.

⁹ See Ezek 34:2-16; Jer 50:6-7.

¹⁰ Incidentally, this is important context for the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32); the older brother *didn’t* seek out the lost younger brother.

¹¹ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Supremacy-of-Jesus-Christ.pdf>.

rescues the lost and the scattered sheep of Israel, and brings healing. And in our reading today, Jesus sends out his apostles on a specific mission to help in that endeavor.¹²

Up until this point, Jesus' disciples had been passengers in the car and he's been doing all the driving! They've been astonished at what they have seen, but Jesus has been making all the decisions, handling all the tricky moments and deciding which towns and villages to visit. He's also the one that's taken the criticism and been asked all the tough questions. Now he says to his disciples: "Off you go on your own and *do* what you have seen me do!"¹³ Here are his instructions.¹⁴

First he says: "Do *not* go among the Gentiles or enter *any* town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the 'lost sheep of Israel.'"¹⁵ Why does he say that? After all, Matthew tells us earlier that Jesus said: "Many (non-Jews) will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."¹⁶ I think this instruction is best understood as Jesus being *strategic* here; this directive is only for *this* moment in time. The "lost sheep of Israel" means all the Jews who have been scattered across the Roman Empire over the centuries. And Jesus is deliberately enacting Ezekiel's oracle and he *first* wants to search and bring back the 'lost sheep' back into the main flock; the discerning would understand this act as sign of Jesus' identity. Yes, Matthew tells us that non-Jews have already sought Jesus out on their own initiative, and he has not rebuked them.¹⁷ But Israel herself must hear the message and be given another chance to repent before it's too late.¹⁸ The time for the non-Jews will come *after* the resurrection, as we heard in the Great Commission.¹⁹ Paul understood that strategy too, for he says in Romans: "God brings salvation to *everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the non-Jew.*"²⁰

Second, the message that Jesus tells his apostles to proclaim is: "The kingdom of heaven has come near. [Therefore] heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give."²¹ The apprentice has seen the master in action, now it's *their* turn. The phrase, "see one, do one" comes to mind! Alternatively, it's like birds being taught how to fly by being pushed out of the nest! We might also imagine this as being thrown in at the deep-end and having to quickly learn how to swim – else sink! We would all gulp at such a commission. But let's pause to

¹² Matt 9:37-38 is important context for Matt 10.

¹³ Matt 10:1; "Jesus gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness."

¹⁴ Matt 10 is known as the "missionary discourse" and Matthew brings together material from Mark 6: 8–11 and 13:9–13.

¹⁵ Matt 10:5. See also Matt 15:24 and [9].

¹⁶ Matt 8:11-12. Note this is in the context of the healing of the *Roman* centurion's servant. See also Matt 15:28; 21:4.

¹⁷ See: Matt 8:5-13 and perhaps this is implied in Matt 4:25. The *intent* of the gospel being also for Gentiles is present in Matt 2:1-12 and hinted at in the mention of the women in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus in chapter 1.

¹⁸ Matt 3:2; 4:17, 10:7 (i.e., Jesus agrees with John's message of repentance).

¹⁹ Matt 28:19-20 – "*all* nations," and that mission's story is told in Acts. N T Wright says, "If Jesus and his followers had started out with their message to the Gentile world at this stage, no self-respecting Jew would've paid them any more attention. It would've confirmed his enemies' taunts that "he is in league with the devil"! And William Barclay says, "The apostles were not (yet) equipped to preach to the Gentiles - just look at Paul's life and background for that!"

²⁰ Rom 1:16; 15:8.

²¹ Matt 10:7-8.

remember that the disciples were simply ordinary people, an undistinguished bunch, and that should give hope for all of us! Yes, Jesus earlier rebukes his disciples for having “little faith,”²² but now having commissioned them, he trusts them to get on with the task! You see, Christianity is not a philosophy that can be learned separate from those who *embody* it. On an Anniversary Sunday, we acknowledge that we were all taught by those who were previously *sent*; now it’s *our* turn to pass it on. The message the disciples preached concerning the coming of God’s kingdom was to be rendered believable through concrete demonstrations of God’s love and care. Being an apostle is *not*, then, about us, *it’s about the person who calls us and sends us* – Jesus the Messiah and *his* kingdom.

Third, Jesus tells them to mind their demeanor as they go about their mission. They may be heralds of King Jesus, but they are *not* to lord it over others or seek a grand status for themselves. They are to be scrupulous to avoid suggestions that they are out to take other people’s money. They are to travel light²³ and, in typical Jewish fashion, they are to rely on the tradition of hospitality. If the apostles and their message are welcomed, great! If they are rejected, then they should simply move on to the next place for time is precious.²⁴ Jesus says of that rejection: “Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.”²⁵ That’s a strange thing to say, what does he mean? In Genesis 19 we read of God’s destruction of those towns because they *betrayed their duty of hospitality* by subjecting Lot and his wife and daughters to treachery. In the present case, the towns are rejecting the “good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near”²⁶ in the person of Jesus the Messiah. It’s a severe warning not to let this opportunity go by, not least because others are desperately needing to hear this news.²⁷

In summary, then, Jesus is (a) very *focused* in his mission strategy, (b) he *empowers* his followers do what he does, and (c) he expects them to travel light and keep on the move in the same way he has *modeled* for them. In this way Jesus is a brilliant rabbi. He’s also a *visionary*; he said earlier, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.”²⁸ Jesus is *not* worried that people will *not* accept his message, he is concerned that too few are willing to embody it and share it with others. That’s both a sobering and encouraging thought for today.

Matthew doesn’t tell us the outcome of this particular mission trip, though Mark and Luke report that the gospel was preached and people were healed.²⁹ Some imagine today that if a church were seeing dramatic miracles happening frequently, the crowds would be simply flocking in! Certainly it’s true that many people are fascinated by miracle stories. Yet I think many *more* are skeptical and regard those who are attracted by miraculous claims as simply gullible. I suspect that many of those attracted by the

²² Matt 8:26a.

²³ Compare the lists in Matt 10:9-15 with Mark 6:8-11 and Luke 9:3-5.

²⁴ “Shaking the dust off your shoes/clothes” is a strong Jewish expression of rejection. We also see that taking place in Acts during all Paul’s missionary journeys; see Acts 13:51; 18:6.

²⁵ Matt 10:15.

²⁶ Matt 10:7.

²⁷ See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Harvest-is-Plentiful.pdf> .

²⁸ Matt 9:37.

²⁹ See Mark 6:12,30; Luke 9:6,10. See also Luke 10:17-24.

thought of miracles do so with selfish motives. Many seek the gifts, but not the Giver. This is illustrated in Luke's story of the ten men who had leprosy, who were all healed by Jesus, yet only *one* returned to say "thank you," and he was a despised Samaritan!³⁰ Indeed, one of the lingering questions that we find addressed in various ways within the New Testament is: "Why *didn't* the Jews recognize that Jesus was the Messiah?" Surely it should be "obvious" with all those dramatic miracles and with their Messianic expectations from the Old Testament prophets. What, therefore, is the explanation for the apparent "hard-heartedness" of some of the Jewish people? Matthew later discusses that issue in the Parable of the Sower.³¹ There Jesus cites Isaiah to explain their rejection to his disciples; he says: "For the heart of this people has become dull; they are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes, so that they would not see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them."³² In other words, you can give people all the evidence in the world, but some don't *want* to hear or see that evidence. We simply have to respect their free-will and move on. "Don't waste your time or effort," says Jesus, "For the harvest will still be spectacularly plentiful, just not in this soil."³³

I think this is an important point for churches today. As we seek to re-grow "churches,"³⁴ we first need to think *strategically*; what is appropriate *here and now* with *who and what resources* we have at hand? Remember, a local church is *not* ultimately called to be significant or large, but we *are* called to be *apostolic* – "*sent*" – for the Great Commission applies to *all* of Christ's followers, each in our uniquely different ways. And we're all called to be *faithful to the person who sends us* – Jesus the Messiah and *his* Spirit-led kingdom mission. As we do that, what new and wonderful stories will future generations be celebrating here at St Andrew's on an Anniversary Sunday? One thing for sure, such stories of God's ongoing activity here in Amherstburg can only arise if *we* pass on the "good news" that we've received. And in living out that commission, let's remember Christ's promise to be always with us always, to the very end of the age. Amen

³⁰ Luke 17:11-19.

³¹ Matt 13:1-23. The Parable of the Sower is an agricultural story that resonates well with Matt 9:37-38.

³² Matt 13:15, citing Isa 6:9-10.

³³ Matt 13:8-9,23.

³⁴ Actually, our Spirit-led mission is to extend the Kingdom of God, *not* to rebuild an institution!