

This passage begins with Jesus feeling a little overwhelmed.

Think about that for a minute. Jesus was overwhelmed. He had been teaching people about the good news of God, he had healed the sick, he had fed the hungry, and he looked out on the crowds and he saw a whole lot more people who needed to be healed, a whole lot more people who needed to be fed, a whole lot more people who needed to hear good news. And I imagine he let out an exhausted sigh as he said, “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. God send out more laborers.” Basically, Jesus’ prayer was, “God, I need help.”

And the very next chapter begins by telling us who that help would be. It’s not exactly a “who’s who” of people most likely to be used by God. It was some ordinary fisherman. It was a hated tax collector. It was a freedom fighter who, by the way, probably wanted to kill people like Matthew the tax collector. It was Judas who would betray Jesus. That group of people was the answer to Jesus’ prayer. Those were the laborers he would send out into the harvest.

And I don’t know about you but if I were Jesus, I might have said, “Ummm God, you got anybody else? I’m not sure this crew can cut it.” But that’s not what Jesus said. He believed in them. He trusted them. And he sent them out without him to carry on his work.

This morning I want us to think about what it means that Jesus believes in people like the disciples and people like us. What does it mean that Jesus sends us out into the world to carry on his work? As a congregationalist church, we strongly believe that the work of the church is something that every single one of us is called to do – not just clergy or staff – but all of us. We call it the “priesthood of the believer.” And that’s certainly true about how we operate as a congregation. I mean the strawberry festival was such a testament to what it looks like when all of us take on the work of the church.

But it’s more than that. You see Jesus not only calls us to do the work of our church right here in this place, but he sends us out into the world to share his love and grace and hope with others.

And that can be a scary thing. It’s easy to think that our faith should be private and we shouldn’t talk about it. Or we’re not sure we’re qualified to share our faith. Or we’re worried that people may think we’re one of those weird religious fanatics.

All of those fears are valid and I think we feel them more strongly because there have been countless examples of people claiming they were sent by Jesus doing all sorts of harm:

- 1) Things like condemning people to hell
- 2) Or using the language faith to justify homophobia or transphobia or patriarchy. In fact a major denomination this week kicked out some churches because they had women clergy.
- 3) Or telling people they have to believe exactly what we believe.

So often, we associate sharing faith with things that are more like manipulation and coercion and judgment.

But what I want to say to us this morning is that if we look closely at what Jesus asked the disciples to do (and by extension what I think he asks us to do) it has nothing to do with any of those things.

Nowhere does Jesus tell the disciples to condemn others. In fact, he says just the opposite.

Nowhere does Jesus ask his followers to harm marginalized groups of people. Again, he does just the opposite – any group that is considered an outsider, Jesus goes out of his way to make them an insider.

And nowhere does Jesus tell the disciples to make sure everyone believes exactly what they believe. In fact, when Jesus called the disciples, he never said, “Come and believe in me.” He said, “Come and follow me.” Jesus cares a whole lot more about what we do than what we think.

So now that we’ve established what Jesus doesn’t ask us to do, what is he asking us to do? What does it mean for Jesus to send us?

First, he tells the disciples to “Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons.” Now I know this seems a little weird for us in 2023 since I’m guessing not many of us can say that we’ve performed a miracle before. So I want to invite you to go beyond the specifics of what Jesus is saying and think about the principle Jesus is encouraging the disciples to live by. The principle is this, “When I send you out, you’re going to encounter a lot of people who are hurting. Do what you can to help them.”

Friends, the very first thing Jesus asks the disciples to do is to help people who are hurting. That’s what it means for Jesus to send us out. Feed somebody who is hungry. Visit somebody who is lonely. Encourage someone who is feeling down.

It sounds so simple, right? But the very first thing Jesus asks us to do is to simply do what we can to help others.

Secondly, Jesus tells the disciples to proclaim the good news. I love that phrase, “good news,” because I think if we can really take that seriously, it helps us know exactly what message Jesus wants us to convey.

It is not good news to somebody for them to hear they are condemned. It is not good news to somebody for them to hear that there’s something wrong with them. It is not good news to somebody for them to hear that they will only be accepted on someone else’s terms.

Do you know what good news is?

It’s good news to hear that God loves you for exactly who you are. It’s good news to hear that this church community will love and accept you for exactly who you are. It’s good news to hear that you will be there for you in good times and in bad times.

And that's pretty much it. If the only message the Milton community hears from our church is, "God loves you for who you are. We will accept you for who you are. And we will be there to support you no matter what." If that's the only message people ever hear us proclaim, that's good news.

Third, Jesus tells the disciples to not take anything with them on their journey. This one sounds a bit strange, right? What is Jesus saying? Basically, he's saying, "When I send you out, receive hospitality from others. Let them feed you. Let them give you a place to stay."

Now, we aren't going on a trip across the Judean countryside, but I think the point for us is that sometimes the best thing we can do is to accept hospitality from others. I learned this lesson when I had the chance to spend a summer in South Africa when I was in seminary.

South Africa has one of the largest gaps of wealth in the world. There are extremely wealthy communities and just a few miles down the road is a shanty town. The church where I was working as an intern was this amazing place that had both millionaires and homeless people as an active part of the congregation. And when I was there, different families took turns hosting me – it was sort of a game of pass the American around.

One family that hosted me was Rose and her son Nick. They lived in the Ivory Park township which meant they had basically two sheds made of tin – sort of like what we might store our lawn mower in. One shack was for cooking and eating and the other was where they slept.

And do you know what – they offered me some of the most amazing hospitality I've ever received. They prepared this amazing meal. They insisted that I sleep on the bed and they'd sleep on the floor.

Everything in me wanted to resist letting Rose offer hospitality to me. I thought I should buy her food. I thought I should sleep on the floor, or maybe even buy her another bed. But the moment I did that, I would have put myself in a position over her, even if I had the very best of intentions.

You see the beauty of our faith is this idea that we are all in this together. We all have something to offer. Sometimes we are called to be the one to give to others, to offer what we have. And sometimes, we are called to receive hospitality from others. It's never a one way street. In fact, it's exactly what being a part of a church community is all about. We all give. We all receive. You see, it's not only ok to sometimes let people help you; it can actually be a way we follow Jesus.

And then Jesus ends his instructions to the disciples with these words, "If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you." Is there anything that stands out to you about that statement? Whether we are accepted or rejected, we are called to respond in peace. Do you see that?

If they receive you, let your peace be upon them. If they reject you, let your peace return to you. Or another way to say that is if we're rejected, don't hold a grudge, don't become upset or angry, don't wish them harm, don't obsess over it – let your peace return to you.

You see, one way we know that we are faithfully living out Jesus' call in our lives is if we are acting in a way that reflects peace no matter what's going on around us.

Peace is not shouting about those who believe something different.

Peace is not condemning them.

Peace is respecting whatever another person may think or feel about religion or about our church or about any of us as individuals.

And, maybe more than anything, peace is about letting go of whatever bitterness or resentment we may feel – not just for the other's sake but for our sake.

So yes, Jesus sends us out.

Jesus sends us to help. Jesus sends us to bring good news. Jesus sends us to give and to receive hospitality. And whatever happens, Jesus always sends us in peace. Amen.