

Sermon Proper 6A 2017
Exodus 19:2-8a
Psalm 100
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35-10:14 (15-23)
Bill Watson
June 18, 2017

In our passage from Exodus, the Israelites are journeying to the Promised Land and have reached a critical juncture. God is instructing Moses in what he is to say on his behalf. Moses is to declare God's favor for the Israelites. "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."

The story of scripture is the story of God's connection with his beloved creation, and especially humankind. Last Sunday, we heard the creation narrative from the Book of Genesis. From that story (which we don't take literally), we learn that when God created humankind, he saw that it was "very good." We also heard humanity's call to be co-creators with God. By this we mean that we have a role to play in the on-going development of planet earth "our island home" as the Eucharistic prayer expresses it.

In the Exodus passage, God declared his covenanted relationship with the people of Israel, the beloved people of God. Being called the beloved of God though always comes with expectations. This is a gift freely offered but always with an expectation of response on our part. Two weeks ago, we learned that we were given spiritual gifts for the common good. They were not gifts for our benefit alone nor were they gifts for the benefit of our family or clan. Rather they are gifts for the benefit of all.

That understanding, that the gifts that we have received are for all, developed over quite a bit of time in scripture. In the Exodus passage, God's beloved are the people of Israel. And when Moses delivered the good news of their covenanted relationship with God, they responded accordingly. "Everything that the Lord has spoken, we will do."

Some one thousand years later, our gospel lesson from Matthew chapter 9, still envisions God's grace extended to the people of Israel. At this point, Jesus

sends the disciples only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Matthew described Jesus' ministry. "Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds he had compassion for them..." Jesus must have felt overwhelmed by the demands, the needs, the crowds. There was only so much Jesus could do, even if he was the divine Son of God. Something more must be done. So, Jesus told the disciples to ask God to send more laborers into the harvest. And so they asked.

And lo and behold, they discovered that they were the laborers that God had in mind for expanding the harvest. When it comes to prayer, we always have to be careful what we ask for. Several weeks ago, I spoke of this when I quoted the 20th Century theologian, Oswald Chambers. (From Sunday, May 21) Oswald Chambers said, "We are in danger of forgetting that we cannot do what God does, and that God will not do what we can do." We just may be the answer to our own prayer. So, the dilemma for us is to be cognizant of what it is that we can do. We have to be aware of this because discipleship always comes with demands.

Jesus commissioned the disciples and sent them out. At this point the mission was limited, perhaps just to make it manageable. "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Mt. doesn't say it but Mark and Luke make clear that Jesus sent them out in teams, two by two (from Mk and Luke). God may have done this for many reasons including, companionship, teamwork, support, and the pooling of talents. Like doubles in tennis if we ask our resident champion, Charlie Larson. Going out in pairs allows us to do more. To pick up the slack and support each other. Perhaps most importantly this gives us someone with which to reflect upon our experiences and learn from them. Un-reflected experience has no ability to teach us. It is only when we pause and share and reflect that we learn. (We do this at the end of each day on mission trips.) "Been there and done that" is never an adequate motto in life. The question if the experience is to have meaning is, "what did you learn?" What will you do differently next time? That is the power of reflection. All of life is a learning opportunity really. If we but pause to reflect and evaluate. Not instantly necessarily, but over time and thus allowing the Spirit to join in the process.

Jesus sent the disciples out two by two and their mission was to proclaim the good news, that the kingdom of God has come near. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. No easy tasks in that list. As disciples of Jesus, we too are sent. And with the resurrection of Jesus we have even more good news to share.

Part of these sending in mission narratives captivates me. I am captivated by what Jesus instructs the disciples to do when things don't go well. They are to pause and reflect and then importantly let go if things didn't work out as they had hoped. Jesus knew that all wouldn't be smooth sailing. So when things don't go as planned, when the disciples are not welcomed, then they are to "Shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town?" The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all say this underscoring the importance. Now that doesn't mean that they aren't supposed to reflect upon what happened to see if they can learn from the experience. They are to do that for sure. But once they have reflected upon the experience then they can let it go. They aren't carrying any bags with them so that they don't pick up any baggage along the way, like the baggage of failed experiences. Jesus says that mission, taking the good news of Jesus into the world will not be easy or without let downs. But that is not to set us back. We are to try again and again.

That too is something we need to learn in life. And it is a particular Christian learning and it is a learning that extends to many areas of our lives. Shaking the dust from our feet is a metaphor that can apply to all sorts of experiences involving loss, disappointment and pain. Bad things happen and when they do we must reflect upon them, learn from them. And then we can let go of our hurt and pain. We aren't to nurture or treasure them or else they can weigh us down, and even become toxic to our moving forward in discipleship and in life. We get to choose. Carl Jung once said, "I am not what happened to me, but what I choose to become." I think this is what Jesus had in mind when he taught the disciples to kick the dust from their feet.

I am reminded that being sent in teams can occur in lots of ways. I recall the life and ministry of Peter and Liz. Peter was a gifted physician whose specialty was Internal Medicine. (Medicine ran in the family and his brother was an internist at the Mayo Clinic.) Peter was beloved and seemingly cared for everyone in his small adopted home town in KY. Peter's wife Liz managed his medical office. But then Peter developed an illness similar to Parkinson's disease. Rapidly

it effected his speech and mobility. Peter had more and more trouble communicating with his patients. Liz changed her role to a clinical one. She came into the exam rooms and acted as Peter's interpreter. Peter's skills continued to be accessible through Liz' participation. The situation was unusual but met the community's needs for quite some time. In Peter's case, the disappointment and pain of illness were an opportunity to transform his practice and allowed him to continue to offer his healing power to the community.

The Hebrew scriptures reveal the covenanted relationship with God's chosen people, the people of Israel. But the understanding of just who are the beloved of God, God's chosen people expanded over the course of the gospel accounts. Over a period of time the mission expanded beyond the people of Israel. In today's gospel the mission was still to the people of Israel but by the end of Matthew's gospel the mission had expanded as we heard last Sunday. The disciples of Jesus are to "go and make disciples of all nations." God's love is for humanity in all its diversity. Yes, even in all its brokenness.

There is work to be done and friends, we are the laborers that God is sending into the harvest. We are disciples of Jesus. As the Blues Brothers said, "We're on a mission from God." The "harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few." We are the laborers that God has drawn together here at St. John's. Together we possess all the skills we might need. So in the midst of our busy lives, God has great hopes for us. We are the beloved of God. You see, we too have been commissioned, chosen. And it can feel a little overwhelming? Yet, God equips us with the gifts we need. We are to use these gifts for the common good. We are God's chosen people, chosen and beloved. And that relationship comes with expectations. We are commissioned to go into the world and share Christ's love (our mission statement). What we do (or don't do) makes all the difference.