

worship services in July.

With their mission set before them, the disciples were sent out. One major task was to *proclaim* the good news that in Jesus, God's reign on earth was coming near. God's way in the world was and is taking shape, even though we can't totally see it yet. They were also sent out *embodying* good news. Good news that Jesus sends all people to serve, not just certain people with certain skills. Good news that Jesus equips us for our work and ministry, even when we aren't quite sure how to do it all. Good news that Jesus gives us authority to do challenging things that embody his values of peace and justice and love. Good news that there are limits to what each of us can do on our own. On our journey, us disciples get to share and to be good news.

Ministry and serving God is never easy. But it is extraordinary. Us everyday people get to participate in *God's work*: in making a reign of love come true, in blessing all people, in bringing justice and equity. To be sent out by Jesus is powerful indeed. May you claim your authority as a disciple. May you embrace the good news you have to share, and the good news that you embody as one whom Jesus sends.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

June 25, 2023
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
"Compassion for the Crowds"
Rev. Emma Nickel
Matthew 9:35-10:8

I'm imagining a re-working of today's passage. It goes like this: "Then Jesus summoned his leaders at First Presbyterian Church in Royal Oak and gave them authority for their ministry. The names of these leaders were Julie and Jess; Robin, mother of Megan and Christian, and her friend Anne-Marie; Karen, sister of Andrea, and Derek, father of Annika and Kavanaugh; Rick, son of Helen, and Karen, grandmother of four; Cassie, manager at the temple of Starbucks; Edie and Kevin and Candace; Suzanne the attorney; and Keith the real estate agent. These elders, along with twelve faithful deacons, Jesus sent out with the following instructions: minister to those who are here and those we have not yet met; proclaim the good news: "the kingdom of heaven has come near."

My little take on Jesus' words lifts up the people who, in the coming year, will be serving as elders on our Session, what we call our board members and our board. Later in the service today, some of those folks who are taking on a new term of service will be installed and those who are serving for the first time will be ordained, or commissioned, for their ministry. Other people who have been ordained before will come forward to lay hands on them in blessing. It will feel like most of the congregation gets out of their seats because a lot of other people here have served as elders before, too. Those hands and prayers remind us that we are carrying on a tradition of mission and ministry that comes to us all the way down from Jesus himself. It is his mission of service and love that we still embody today.

Presbyterians believe that certain people are called to be leaders in that mission - such as those elders I named, as well as the deacons, who offer compassion and care for the congregation. But we also believe that ALL of us are part of that mission. Whether you just joined the church last week, whether you're visiting, or whether you count your years of membership by the decade, we all share in the tasks Jesus set forth. For this mission, the scripture uses a metaphor of laborers who were needed to bring in a big harvest. That agricultural image is pretty far from most of our experience. So we might imagine it differently. Maybe that Jesus wants all the players on the team to head out onto the field for the big game. To play well, the team

needs everyone to use their gifts well. Whether we think of ourselves as disciples or laborers or team players, all of us are ministers. We are *all* involved in sharing good news with the wider world.

In the passage, Jesus gave the disciples particular tasks: proclaim good news, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons, give without payment. I'm definitely on board with the good news and generally with the giving. But the rest of those things, I'm not real sure about. The crowds were the direct inspiration for sending the disciples into the world. Jesus saw them and had compassion for them. He saw that they were harassed and helpless. They were wandering around like lost sheep who had no shepherd. They had needs, they were hurting, they didn't know where to turn. Jesus responded to the specific needs of the crowds in that time: helping lepers, casting out demons, and curing the sick.

What are the needs of the crowds in our time? I spent some time with the prayers that many of you wrote down earlier this month at our Global Hymn Fest; the ones on the sticky notes that we stuck to a picture of the globe. The congregation was asked to write their specific prayers for the world. The prayers were simple and beautiful and heartfelt; they encompassed a lot. Some of the common themes in the prayers were for places torn by war and violence, or the lingering effects of it. Especially Ukraine, Sudan, Haiti, and Syria. There were prayers for people celebrating Pride Month and hopes that LGBTQ neighbors will receive acceptance and love from all, especially the church. There were prayers for those living with depression and people coping with mental health challenges. And there were many prayers for our country, for the division we live with, and all that threatens peace and stability.

Your prayers encapsulate a lot of the needs of the crowds today. So how would Jesus send us modern day disciples - us members of the team - to respond to those needs with compassion?

Might we be a beacon of hope for those who are withering under the weight of conflict and fear about the future? Our God is always making things new, always has the last word, and that last word is almost always, love. Our task is to figure out how to communicate that hope in fresh ways and to make sure it shows in our actions, not just our words.

Might we continue to offer a welcome to those who are "othered" in our community, whether LGBTQ folks, immigrants, people of color, or those stigmatized by their mental health? But maybe even going beyond a 'welcome' to those neighbors, and instead offering an *active invitation*, believing that our God has good news to offer.

Might we lift our voices *against* a kind of faith that aligns itself with any particular political leaning or party? We could seek to outdo one another in listening to those who are different from us and treating our enemies with curiosity, rather than hate. We could emulate Jesus' way of dealing with those

who opposed him, by responding with love and humility, even as we stand up for those on margins, just like he did.

These tasks of ministry are all enormous ones, and it's not always clear cut how to go about them. They are also important and meaningful in our time. They offer good news - maybe surprising news - in a hurting world. If our ancestors in faith could be sent out to cure the lepers and raise the dead, then maybe it's not such a stretch to imagine Jesus sending us out to do these things?!

Our church's current Session has set a vision for the coming year to focus on Growing in Spirituality, Service, and Sharing. They have set a goal to help us deepen and nurture our spiritual connections to God and each other. They are thinking through ways to increase our service to our neighbors as we seek to be out ministering alongside them. And they are pondering how we can be more present and visible with God's love in the community, at city events or activities. Those goals are ways we are seeking to respond to the needs of the world; ways to act with compassion toward the crowds.

The Session tried to make sure our church's vision and goals for the year are achievable. But responding to the vast needs of the world often seems almost out of reach. Are we really up to the challenges? Do we really have the authority to do all this in Jesus' name? I'm sure it was hard for the first disciples to believe they could do it either. Certainly they must have doubted, too, thinking that only Jesus could do such extraordinary acts. But Jesus would not have sent them out to do something they were not capable of. They received authority to cure and heal and forgive *through Jesus*. We still believe that God in Christ equips us for the tasks we are sent to do. That is true for each of us as disciples. It is true for the leaders who will be commissioned for their particular service as deacons and elders today. Plenty of the tasks we are called to seem daunting or maybe even impossible. And yet, God gives us what we need to do them; God surrounds us with the support and the people who can help us do them faithfully.

But there are limits, too. Jesus went on to tell his disciples these famous words about their upcoming journey: "As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, *shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.*" Jesus said, you don't have to keep working at something that isn't working. You don't have to work your fingers to the bone forever, serving and helping and being selfless. That doesn't mean we should give up quickly or quit at the first sign of resistance. But it does mean there are limits. Sometimes, you have to stop and look around and realize that the time has come to let something go. Shake the dust from your feet. Take a rest, and move on. Next month, we're focusing on God's call to rest in our Sabbath series in worship. Taking time for sabbath rest is all about setting limits on our work. If you are feeling worn out or are wishing for rest, I hope you'll come explore those ideas during our