

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon 4.2.17  
Scripture: Matthew 10

I know of only one person who had a valid reason for swearing off coming to church here ever again. After quite regular Sunday morning attendance for several weeks, maybe months, he left one Sunday with his wife and told her that they'd never be coming back. He claimed it was clear to him that I hated the government and he wasn't going to listen to someone who clearly hates the government. That's what he told his wife, and that's what she told me.

This was a long time ago now, but even at the time I didn't know what had led him to this conclusion. I couldn't track down what I'd said or done that had him thinking I hate the government.

I don't, incidentally. I don't hate, have never hated, our government. As you likely know, I take strong issue with our current president—his character and conduct; and I'm mystified as to why people support him. But he is the exception that proves the rule: I generally respect those who hold public office, though some more than others, and I accept our government as one of the better solutions to the persistent problem of how people might best live together—sustain civilization, form societies, see to the allocation of resources, and secure human well being. I'm grieve our militarism. I'm resist our obsession with economic growth and our basic consumerism, that consuming goods will solve all our difficulties. I'm skeptical of American Exceptionalism. But I do love the problem that is America more than I love the problem that is all the other countries, nations, and principalities about which I've thought.

So, he was wrong to conclude that I hate the government.

That said, his was the best reason I've ever heard of for quitting church. What's more, I was kind of happy that I'd managed to have that affect on someone—the affect that Jesus anticipated for his disciples. He knew that, in their bearing forth the good news of the kingdom of heaven having come near, they would make a lot of enemies. Jesus knew: "...you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me...My coming won't bring peace, but a sword..."

This 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's gospel recalls what Jesus said to his first disciples before sending them out to proclaim the good news and to make it real and felt in people's

lives—healing the sick, bringing a holy spirit to those possessed of unholiness. This 10<sup>th</sup> chapter is a grab-bag of directives and insinuations, laid out in no discernable order; and, though some seem straightforward, others are strange, even disturbing. This is one of those readings that need interpretation. This is one of those readings that, if you're going to have it read aloud in worship, you have to offer preaching on it. It simply doesn't speak for itself, not in any intelligible, applicable way.

Which is probably why this 10<sup>th</sup> chapter is spread out over three weeks (always early in the season of Pentecost in Year A, when we follow Matthew's gospel). No doubt it's the case that all this is simply too much for one sermon. And yet here we are, on the last of the three weeks when we've heard not *any* of this in the prior two weeks, so we have to cram it all in now.

It just seemed too important not to hear it all. The notion that Jesus called and sent disciples out into the world, that he taught and disciplined these friends in the way of grace and good news and then sent them out where they'd be welcome in some cases and very much not in other cases: this just seemed too important for us not to explore.

After all, it seems relevant, wouldn't you say? We, a smattering of latter day disciples, can't just stay in here all week long and keep the good news to ourselves, can't keep private what God meant for all to hear and to know and to love. Shall we be the spiritual 1%, I once asked us? Shall we amass the goods of God without even attempting to share them? Shall we hoard a thing, which only abounds in its being shared, which otherwise shrinks and rots beyond recognition? Shall we be the spiritual 1%?

It's particular to Matthew that they were to stay amidst the people Israel. He alone remembers Jesus to have said, in issuing them forth, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go gather the lost sheep of the house of Israel." He alone remembers that this subset of Jews should stay among Jews, shall not go forth into the wider culture. Actually, this insistence amounts to a pattern for this gospel writer—a pattern that leads biblical scholars to conclude that Matthew was a practicing and devout Jew.

This wouldn't have changed for him though he came to follow the way of Christ. That he was a Jew who had come to follow Christ: this wouldn't have felt to him like a conversion—because the way of Christ wasn't then seen as a new religion but an answer to the old religion, a deepening of it, a purifying and then and fulfilling of it. Jesus seems to have

represented to Matthew an opportunity to return the people Israel to their original mission from which they'd strayed. The religious authorities had become corrupt. Their teachings and practice excluded the poor rather than making the poor central to the mission, overlooked the widow and the orphan even while they proclaimed to care as of old. The religion had gone slack, had lost its way.

This happens, you know. Of course, you know: it happens that those who deem themselves righteous often are not so much. Hypocrisy among the righteous is an ancient problem, and a current one; is a Jewish problem, and a Christian one, and a Muslim one, and a secular humanist one; is simply a human problem. The more sure and overt we are of our righteousness the more likely we are to corrupt that righteousness with a will to power or a brittle judgmentalism. And since Matthew had once held the priesthood in high esteem, and had long practiced his religious tradition with devotion, he was (it seems) especially incensed to discover the unrighteousness of the religious authorities, the corruption of a practice whose aim is good. These were *his* people, after all, and they'd betrayed *him*, fallen short of *his* need of them.

So, Matthew remembers Jesus as directing the disciples to attend specifically to the lost sheep of Israel, those who'd slipped through the cracks of the system, those who were supposed to be a particular concern but had become simply the cost of doing of business. Matthew alone remembers it this way.

He is *not* alone, however, in remembering that Jesus anticipated for the disciples trials ahead—sometime literally trials. Their departure from the status quo would provoke the guardians of the status quo to take action. Their healing the sick and cleansing the lepers would disrupt the economy of status and value, of blessing and curse. Their receiving no payment would cast them in a sketchy light: what were they up to? What were they *really* up to? And this suspicion would make it so the good news that the kingdom of heaven is realized in self-giving love would be rejected outright. Absurd! Backward! Naïve!

They'd be accused. They'd be prosecuted. They'd be divided from family members, and they would divide members of other families from one another. They'd be the bringer of the thing over which brothers would betray brothers to death, and fathers would betray their children, and children would rise up against their parents.

The guardians of the status quo have their spies, after all, those who can be trusted to see something and then say something.

If Jewish culture is understood as having been just this rigid, just this paranoid, it can only rightly be so by keeping in mind the Roman war against the Jews. The time of Matthew's writing his gospel, around the year 80 AD, was a time of unprecedented violence—the Roman Empire persecuting the Jews in their midst like never before. So, certain Jews saw their survival as dependent on their living quietly and with dignity, not causing a scene, not straying from the implicit social contract of laying low and letting the religious authorities arrange an armistice with the imperial authorities on whatever terms they deem necessary. What's a little collusion when it means your survival?

But then along come these disciples, these followers of the way—come with no gold, no silver, no copper in their belts; come with neither cloak nor bag nor anything extra; come with a new teaching about the nature of empire and a kingdom whose coming makes illegitimate all imperial aim, makes irrelevant all imperial pomp. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's—his coins and his trinkets. Give to God what is God's—which is to say everything that has true and enduring value.

You expect the status quo to just absorb that sort of insult, that sort of attack? What was *wrong* with these people? They had it good enough, but now they wanted more. I mean, just when black people get acceptance and civil rights, then along come these black *power* people, with their Afros and their African-inspired garb and their talk of reparations. Just as gays and lesbians have a cozy closet in which to just go about their business, and maybe a few bars where they can peaceably congregate (for the most part), then come the parades and the pride and the rainbow flags. Can't they all just leave well enough alone?

Well, no. As it happens, no. The gospel demands otherwise: we cannot leave well enough alone. After all, well enough is not well. Healed enough is not healed. Whole enough is not whole. Good enough is not good. "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Innocent that the status quo simply won't do, not now that the kingdom of heaven has come near; but wise that the status quo will have its say, will lash back, will, when seeing something, say something. And then you'll be dragged before governors and kings, will be forced to answer to a spirit of accusation—and will be given words of true testimony and faithful wisdom by the Holy Spirit.

This is the sword Jesus knew himself to have brought in his coming. This is the sword of decisiveness that Jesus knew his presence would provoke. It's unhelpful—this translation. “I have come not to bring peace, but a sword.” It's unhelpful because it makes it sound as if Jesus' intent in coming was to cause such un-peace, such armed division. But a truer understanding is that Jesus understood his presence among us would result in un-peace, would result a decisiveness that is given image in the sword—the sword as dividing what had been one entity now into two parts. This would happen in Jesus' coming, but this wasn't the reason why he came, and it isn't reason enough for him not to come at all. Though he knew it would result in division, even conflict, that wouldn't dissuade him from coming, and shouldn't cause us to reject him as not causing the sort of affect we want.

It's simply the case that the presence of something both new and good will upset the carefully balanced armistice we have put in place for the meantime. But that doesn't mean we should prefer the armistice over the good. All it means is that we should understand what's at stake when we choose the good—choose it over the good enough.

To understand this, incidentally, is what I think it means “to be worthy.” Did you notice all the talk of worthiness in Jesus' commissioning? “Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave.” “If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.” “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” To be worthy finds its linguistic root in weight, in measuring as in weighing coins on a scale to determine their worth. Someone is worthy if it bears down on the balance of the scale. Something is worthy if it has weight, if it has gravitas.

So, to be worthy...

I've discovered that a chief cause for my own “coming to church” is because here presents an opportunity to be taken seriously and to take things seriously. I already gave you one of the better reasons for not coming to church—that here there simply won't be much love for the government, much flag waving and patriotism going on. So here's one of the better reasons for coming to church—that here your concerns and your delights, your laments and your alleluias, will be taken seriously (if also lightly). Really, especially in this age of irony where nothing is given too straightforward a take, everything is always with a sideward

glance and knowing smirk, coming to church presents a chance to be entirely at one with yourself. Not self-conscious, not self-referential, not watching yourself as if from outside yourself, in worship there's a different sort of performance going on, and a different sort of audience: the performance of an ancient form for an audience that is love, God.

I love the set of mind that worship invites.

And I think this is what it means to be worthy, what it means to be worthy of the kingdom of heaven having come near: to have a sense of seriousness and mindfulness and wisdom about it all, about our predicament and about God's saving grace. The profundity of this whole gospel project simply doesn't fit into so many frameworks of human making, so to try to make it fit is to distort it and even betray it, to make it into something other than what it is. You know, people ask me, "Why are you a pastor? What's your church like?" And it's simply the case that I can't sum it up, that to try to sum it up would be to misrepresent it altogether. Such summation simply isn't worthy of what we're doing here together. So, I can only say what Jesus is said to have said, "Come and see."

But this makes all the more challenging the task set before us in this commissioning—this Jesus commission people not unlike us to go forth and share what his coming has brought. As it happens, this commission has given rise specifically to the hospitality movement in church—and because it calls to mind the essential importance of hospitality in the Ancient Near East. That the disciples were to take no provisions for themselves but were to rely on the provisions that the spirit of hospitality would make possible and real, that they were to accept what food was offered and what room was free: this has all given rise to conversations in modern congregations about welcoming the stranger and showing hospitality to any and all who come through our doors.

But, important as that is, it's also to misread the scenario laid out here because the disciples weren't doing the welcoming in, they were doing the surrendering to what welcome (or not) they would be met with. And I think that's a much harder thing to do. Especially for us moderns, us Americans, us go-getters who are well acquainted with our own agency and our being in control, I think we're far more open to welcoming strangers into our space (and showing them how it's rightly done) than we are to going out as strangers into the space of others—to what sounds and smells we might encounter out there, to what comforts and

assumptions others might live by. I know that's the case for me: assured of the rightness of my own way of being, it's getting more and more difficult to accept as right others' ways of being.

I mean, why would you use air conditioning when you can just open the windows? And why would you have satin sheets when cotton is so much cooler and softer? Why would you *not* have feather pillows, and why would you make me take off my shoes in your home because...my *feet*? In truth, one of my favorite aspects of being a pastor is the access it gives me to other people's homes. I love the need to discern the household rules and values, and then to join them (or not if my objection runs deep). It's a wonderful practice, though it can be a troubling revelation. I'm not always the disciple I aim to be. I don't suppose any of us is.

That is, if this sort of discipleship is your aim. If it's your aim to choose the good over the good enough, come what may; if it's your aim to bring into the world something whose weight and worth might not fit easily into sociability and making nice; if it's your aim to surrender control in faithfulness to grace; if it's your aim to live by self-giving love though this might cost you, even greatly, because by this you believe the world will be saved: then I don't suppose you've always been the disciple you aim to be either.

That's why we *practice* our faith. That's why we *rehearse* it here, that is hear again aloud each Sunday, every Sunday. That's why hearing this commissioning whole struck me as important. So, if this sort of discipleship isn't your aim—if the way things are is what you seek to praise, if the systems already set in place are where you mean to devote yourself, if the conversation you mean to have with your life doesn't get so heavy at times as to weigh us down, if you mean for your life not to cost you anything—then you've got a decision to make. It actually pains me to say that. I don't actually like the idea of such decision and such possible division. But that's what we're doing here. We're making disciples, of ourselves and of one another.

That said, if you're undecided, you can take some time, you can take *this* time. Sit in silence and wonder. Weigh your options and see which are worthy of you.

Take your time.

Thanks be to God.