

The kingdom of heaven has come near: de-centering yourself

21 June 2020

Matthew 10:24-39

This passage is part of Jesus' instruction and teaching to prepare his 12 disciples for their first mission. To understand all that is happening, we need to understand what Jesus instructs.

We are at the beginnings of Jesus' ministry on earth – he calls his 12 core disciples and goes around to synagogues across cities and villages. Jesus teaches and proclaims the good news of the kingdom. Not only is he preaching but he is doing acts too – curing all disease and sicknesses.

From these interactions with crowds, the Gospel writer Matthew notes for us that Jesus had compassion for the people because “they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36). So, he calls on his 12 and begins to prepare to send them out.

Jesus specifically instructs the 12 to go *only* to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (10:6). They will proclaim the good news to the people of Israel, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” (v. 7). Not only are they to preach, but they are also to act by curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, and casting out demons (v. 8). They are not to take anything but wherever they go, they are to find persons who are *worthy* and stay with them while ministering (v. 11).

Jesus could have ended his instruction there: Go, and do this.

Yet, he continues with warnings of what to expect: that they are entering *dangerous work* saying, “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (v. 16). Beware! For they will be handed over to be disciplined by the religious authority by flogging, a tool used by religious leaders to discipline persons who *overtly* acted against traditional teachings and laws. They will be dragged before governors and kings to face threats of capital punishment.

What in the world was Jesus actually tasking his disciples to preach and do that they would be treated this way – especially from their own people and government?

What does the good news “the kingdom of heaven has come near” mean to evoke such reactions?

After receiving the news that she would bear a son who will be known as the Son of the Most High, Mary set off to see her kinfolk Elizabeth – and through their interactions, we hear Mary’s prophetic song of praise. In Mary’s Magnificat, she praises God “not just for the remarkable conceptions that she and her kinswoman Elizabeth have experienced but also –indeed, primarily – for the way in which these pregnancies portend God’s saving action for the downtrodden [Israel]” (Richard B. Hays, *The Liberation of Israel in Luke Acts*, 2009, 104).

Mary sings of the proud scattered for what is in their hearts. She also sings of how power structures are flipped – the powerful are dethroned and the lowly (like women) lifted. The hungry are contented with good things and the rich do not take these away – there’s emphasis on both individual and corporate changes. The structures that allowed those who held authority and influence to keep others hungry and oppressed are no more.

Her song’s language is like “a harmonious descant” to Hannah’s song of praise (1 Sam 2:1-10) which appears in Psalm 113 – the first of the cycle of Psalms “sung before the Passover meal in the Jewish tradition” to celebrate God’s powerful intervention “to [raise] the poor from the dust and [lift] the needy from the ash heap” (1 Sam 2:8; Ps 113:7) (Hays, 104-105).

Mary’s prophetic song points to the individual and collective changes that draw connection to the history of the Israel people with God. Hearts are changed, but so are systems and structures that people assumed were normal.

And in Jesus’ inaugural public teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth, he reads from Isaiah 61 with a fragment from Isaiah 58. The scripture is fulfilled in the people’s hearing. The kingdom of heaven is near. The poor are lifted up. The captives released. The blind given sight. The oppressed free – all in connection to “the year of the Lord’s favor” – alluding to the life of Jubilee mandated to God’s people in Leviticus.

With his public proclamation, he is rejected in Nazareth. The people there discounting him as “that poor kid from nowhere Nazareth,” “Joseph’s son,” “that Johnson kid from Brookside Park.” Those listening became so enraged that they drove Jesus out and tried to kill him (Luke 4:28-29).

His proclamations and acts become “the catalyst “for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and...a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35)” (Hays, 108).

Jesus isn't the meek and mild infant that some may carry until his sudden growth into an adult with his death on the cross.

His preaching and works challenged closely held traditions and rules by saying he was the fulfillment of them all – a fulfillment that went against those thriving in structures that kept them oppressively powerful and influential. His ministry on earth ultimately led religious leaders demanding the death penalty and humiliation of Jesus and everything he stood for.

“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt 10:34b).

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28).

“Acknowledge me before others” (Matt 10:32a) acknowledge what I stand for and not just in secret (v. 27).

Jesus knew he had to prepare his disciples for the inevitable reality of what it meant to proclaim the good news he brought and embodied. “Faithful proclamation and practice of the gospel inevitably puts disciples on a collision course with the powers of this world” (Stanley Saunders, Commentary on Matthew 10:24-39, 2014).

The disciples who are worthy are ones who live out this dangerous call to follow. To let go of all false securities that human power constructs to find true life in the eternal and participate in the eternal work. For us to let go of all false securities we've stacked around us like walls to protect us.

Through laying out the stark realities, Jesus reminds his disciples and us the importance of de-centering ourselves and recognizing with clarity the blocks that built the walls holding us back from

fully participating in this dangerous work of faithful proclamation and gospel practice whether it be being maligned by those with power, unhealthy fears, or remaining silent in the public.

De-centering ourselves is the catalyst to unleash the power of the Spirit to move us into faithful proclamation that “the kingdom of heaven has come near” and gospel practice. To realize, to learn, to appreciate more and more the known and hidden depths of the meaning that the kingdom of heaven has come near – fire-touched tongues proclaiming the release of the captives, the recovery of sight to the blind, the liberation of the oppressed, the proclaim the life of jubilee and true worship of God now and forevermore.

Yet, unfortunately, there will be some who resist embracing this proclamation and life. Even within our most intimate relationships within the home and even in the family that builds up the body of Christ.

We may be uncomfortable and tired of hearing our Black siblings proclaim the news that Black lives matter. The phrase may feel clunky and foreign on our tongues – the muscles unaccustomed to forming the contours of this sentence.

Yet this phrase is the faithful proclamation woven in intimate languages of our Black siblings – their fire-touched tongues faithfully proclaiming the good news – their mouths rejoicing with the recognition that their lives and communities which have been brutalized for centuries are worthy, precious, honored, and loved unconditionally by God – that the oppressed are free, the lowly raised, the poor contented. Proclaiming from the housetops that individuals, systems, and structures that oppress and kill Black lives will not last. God’s justice and liberation is at hand. The life of jubilee and faithful worship is at hand.

May we hear the good news being proclaimed from the housetops and streets. May we not silence their voices but hear the beautiful polyphony of faithful proclamation. May we hear them. Repent. And believe. Amen.