“***Freely You Received***” by S. Finlan, for The First Church, June 14, 2020

**Matt 9:36, 10:1–8 (v. 8 in NASB)**

36When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. . .

10:1Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. 2These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; 3Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus;4Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, 6but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ 8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give.”

Even if we are not miracle workers today, we can be a comfort to our family and friends, and be bearers of joy and hope. Perhaps we can cast out the unclean spirits of isolation and fear. Compassion is the key. I like the remark about Jesus having compassion on the “harassed and helpless” crowds, who were “like sheep without a shepherd.” It shows Jesus’ kindness to anxious and confused humans. Sometimes we may feel harassed and helpless. It’s nice to know he has compassion for us. More than that, he brought forth the “extra” within “ordinary” people. Maybe we can let our lights so shine, that we can be extraordinary, and lead others to give thanks to God.

Now Jesus, besides his works, also provided spiritual leadership to minister to these people. We get the full list of the twelve, starting with the two pairs of famous brothers, then the four *middling* apostles, Philip, Bartholomew (also known as Nathanael), Thomas, and Matthew (also known as Levi). Finally there are the four *least* apostles: James the Lesser, Thaddaeus, Simon the Cananaean or the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot. They were pretty ordinary fellows, most of them fishermen. But many of them became leaders and preachers in the early church. Jesus gives them quite a lot of authority. They are to heal the sick and raise the dead! We have a report, in Acts, of Peter raising a woman named Tabitha from the dead (9:36–42). For us, it might be enough if we could lift people’s spirits.

Do we still have any kind of miracle today? There are many stories of people who claim to have been miraculously healed. I generally suspend my judgment. I can’t rule out the possibility of miracles today. But for the most part, I expect our healing and miraculous transformation to be a future aspect of the kingdom of God, after this lifetime. *Here*, we need to be able to *have faith* even if we don’t see miracles happening. Our faith needs to sustain us, even when we have to suffer grief and loss. We have to let grief and sorrow be a part of our lives. But faith will be active in our lives, even at such times. Even after tragedy, hope can transform our experience. We can be open to joy, and also able to release and express our sorrow. This is better than keeping sorrow bottled up and letting it veil our present experience.

Now what is the culminating lesson that Jesus is giving here? It is in that last, enigmatic saying: “Freely you received, freely give.” It doesn’t seem to follow from what went before it. It’s a bit of a mystery. It seems like a stand-alone saying.

What can we gather about the main emphasis regarding evangelizing if we look at all four gospels? The focus is on the generous and open offer of salvation, and on the command that preachers, after entering a town, should stay with whatever family takes them in first, instead of hopping to other houses (Matt 10:11–13; Luke 9:4), such as to a richer household. This gives us a clue about our mystery verse. It is all about the generosity of the salvation offer, without favoritism, or anyone being able to claim higher status.

The Father’s salvation is “freely given,” without regard to status, without payment, and without strings attached. We see this generosity and openness in a number of Jesus’ sayings, such as “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me” (John 7:37); “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:3); “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). In these sayings, we see that no strings are attached. Anyone who had listened to Jesus had already “freely received” the offer of salvation, even if they were thirsty, or poor, or heavy laden, or if they were lepers, or Samaritans, or Syrians. Later in this gospel, Jesus will go to “the district of Tyre and Sidon” (15:21; see Luke 6:17; Mark 3:8) and minister to a Syrian woman and her daughter. In the various gospels, he will meet with Samaritans, Greeks, and a Roman centurion (John 4:4–26; 12:20–25; Matt 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10; 17:16).

We are to “freely give”: to make the offer of salvation without price and without judging anyone’s status. “Freely given” means without any kind of manipulation: without threats, without seeking gain, and without making people obligated to us. It’s an offer of life, freely given. How might that play out in an American context? It means that when we share the gospel, we are not seeking approval from any political block, Left or Right. We are not selling out to power. We are not here to anoint either the Left or the Right. That’s not the church’s job. A lot of churches and pastors do it, but if we *know* better, we are obligated to avoid such politicizing of the gospel. Of course, we certainly should reject violence and racial hatred, in *all* cases.

And of course, we constantly have to use our judgment to discern exactly what constitutes “politicizing.” We *do* believe that we need moral progress and transformation. As a church we are concerned with the spiritual motivation of change, with becoming better children of God and disciples of Jesus, learning to practice love more effectively. How the accumulation of human change is going to play out in legislation is the realm of civil society, of politics.

As individuals, we can enter politics as we see fit, and get as involved as we need to be. As a church, however, we should avoid all partisanship, the same way the early church needed to avoid taking sides, to favor neither Jews nor Gentiles over the other. In our church, we have conservatives and liberals in spiritual connection with each other, in *loving* contact, in fact. We are blessed that way, and we need to keep it. A church family *can* and *does* do things that politics cannot do. We are Samaritans and Judeans in friendly relationship with each other, because of the unifying love of our Savior. We are to be bearers of joy and comfort to all, studying the spiritual principles that lead to transformation. With a spiritual message, we go and serve our brothers and sisters, whomever we can reach, without seeking political benefit, or *giving* political benefit. Freely give, without any strings. There is no favoritism in the kingdom based on class or nationality or politics or level of education. We are to keep a generous and open attitude. We all need to humble ourselves and seek God’s will above all else. Then we have to be ready to “be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Rom 12:2). Jesus will change your mind . . . and your heart. Let us partner with Jesus!