

## Discipleship in the Lectionary - 06/18/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, June 18<sup>th</sup>

**Matthew 9:35-10:8, (9-23)**

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### **The Harvest is Plentiful, the Laborers Few**

This week's text provides continued insight into what it means to *be* a disciple. In this week's Gospel lection Jesus calls and sends His twelve out into the harvest. This week's text also provides a glimpse of the remarkable level of diversity that Jesus selected for as He named His twelve disciples. At a time when there is much social unrest and racial tension, the only place where true unity is possible is walking with the Prince of Peace as a disciple of Christ.

#### Matthew 9:35-10:8, (9-23) Commentary

In chapters 5-7 Jesus reveals Himself as the Messiah through the Sermon on the Mount. From 8:1-9:38, Jesus demonstrates He is the Messiah through the working of many miracles. The lectionary text represents the continued unfurling of Jesus' story as He now commissions and sends out His disciples with limited authority to expand aspects of His own ministry.

*<sup>35</sup> And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. <sup>36</sup> When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup> Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; <sup>38</sup> therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."*

The wording in v.35 is like the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount (4:23) and provides a simple summary of Jesus' ministry: teaching, proclaiming, and healing. In v.36, Jesus has compassion for the crowds who are described as sheep without a shepherd. The crowds are helpless and have leaders who have failed them. Unlike the so-called leaders of Israel, with Jesus there is no condemnation of the crowds. With Jesus compassion is both a feeling and a movement to action. Jesus presents Himself here as the Good Shepherd, the promised future David - the Messiah. In v.37, disciples may be the twelve about to be announced or a larger group. Shifting metaphors, Jesus describes the crowds as a plentiful harvest with only few laborers to reap. There are many people who are ready to hear the good news of the kingdom. Then as now, Jesus admonishes His disciples to pray for workers. This illustrates the importance of prayer in evangelism and discipleship. At the same time, prayer is not enough. It also requires work. Verse 38 also reminds us that we are not the Lord of the Harvest but merely workers performing the tasks we have been given. The fruit of the harvest is up to God. As such, no matter how insurmountable the task may appear to us, we must remember God is sovereign.

<sup>1</sup> And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. <sup>2</sup> The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; <sup>3</sup> Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; <sup>4</sup> Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. <sup>5</sup> These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, <sup>6</sup> but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. <sup>7</sup> And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' <sup>8</sup> Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay.

Having called His disciples to pray for workers, Jesus now commissions and sends His disciples into the field as such workers. Jesus gives His disciples the authority they will need to complete His instructions which mirror aspects of Jesus' own ministry. Jesus directs them (at least temporarily) to focus only on the Jews. It will not be until the Great Commission that the disciples are sent into the whole world.

Extended Text:

<sup>9</sup> Acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts, <sup>10</sup> no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff, for the laborer deserves his food. <sup>11</sup> And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart. <sup>12</sup> As you enter the house, greet it. <sup>13</sup> And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. <sup>14</sup> And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. <sup>15</sup> Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.

<sup>16</sup> "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. <sup>17</sup> Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, <sup>18</sup> and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. <sup>19</sup> When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. <sup>20</sup> For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. <sup>21</sup> Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, <sup>22</sup> and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. <sup>23</sup> When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

The extended text section provides some more specific instructions and then indicates the nature of the persecution his disciples can expect. These instructions were consistent with Jewish law and tradition which the original readers of this Gospel would have recognized. A Rabbi, for instance, is not allowed to accept money for his teaching. Many of the dress instructions apply to the dress code for the Temple Mount and thus to Jesus, the whole world is the Temple of God. The idea of staying in only one house was to avoid being persuaded to stay in a more luxurious house once in town. This would give the impression that messengers of Christ court worldly favors. Staying in more than one house could also result in staying too long in one place and thus hinder the spread of the Gospel. The idea of shaking the dust off the feet connects to the practice of Jews entering upon Palestine from a Gentile region. The very presence of dust from a Gentile area would defile their Jewish homeland thus Jews would literally shake such dust of their feet. The call to discipleship risks persecution. Perhaps here is a foretaste of what is to come. Verse 20 provides much comfort. Whenever we act as messengers of Christ, it is the Holy Spirit that gives us the right words to use.

## Reflections

The winds of change are blowing strongly. In the wake of societal stresses brought on by the pandemic and racial tensions, many people are waking up to realize that they are like sheep without a shepherd. Throughout our history, times of great social change are often the precursor to times of great spiritual awakenings. The harvest is indeed plentiful, but the workers are still few. We must pray to the Lord of the Harvest for workers. Yet as the Gospel text reveals, prayer is just the start since we are also workers! Christ expects all His disciples to be involved in the reaping. This is not just a job for the "professionals" in ministry. We are all in ministry.

Amidst the current racial tensions being seen across both the United States and the United Kingdom, a world in which all people have a seat at the table and an equal voice seems to be a long way off, if indeed it is ever possible in this world. Replacing one form of injustice with another is hardly social justice. The church is not immune from these same societal ills. In addition to churches that group based on race, many worry about the growing polarization within politics and how this will continue to influence the church. Indeed, there are clearly Left and Right versions of many denominations in existence. Is a unified church possible? Is it still possible to live out the command that we must love other Christians of a different political persuasion in the way that Christ loved His disciples?

We need only look to Jesus' twelve disciples to see what such unity with diversity and inclusivity looks like. The twelve names listed above (10:2-4) reveal much. First, there are some like Peter and Andrew and James and John who were brothers while others were strangers. Second, in a culture where religious leadership and political leadership were often synonymous, Jesus selected people from ordinary walks of life such as fishermen, a Zealot and a tax collector. In addition to the twelve, Jesus had a larger group of disciples that followed Him that merely compounds such diversity including the prominence of women at a time when this was considered radical by the Jewish culture. Third, they were not perfect. Peter denied Jesus, Judas betrayed Him and there was often infighting within the group. Fourth, there was still hierarchy, even within the twelve. Peter was considered the first in status. Peter, James and John comprised Jesus' inner circle as Jesus would often have only these three accompany Him at pivotal points in His ministry (the Transfiguration, for example).

Finally, and of particular relevance to today, the fact that a Zealot and a tax collector, who were at the polar ends of Jewish political society, could coexist in the same movement is nothing short of a miracle. The Zealots emerged after a new Roman taxation policy around 6 A.D. This movement was dedicated to end Roman resistance by violent means. Like modern terrorists, Zealots would kill and injure Romans and disrupt everyday life. The Zealots also targeted Jews who collaborated with the Romans. The most loathed Jews in this respect were the tax collectors who often took more than the Roman requirement to line their own pockets from their fellow Jews. Before they met Jesus, Simon the Zealot, given half the chance, may well have plunged his sicarii into the chest of Matthew.

Then and now, the Gospel has the power to transform our world for the better. When we look at true discipleship, we see a gulf of a difference between a Kingdom-driven disciple and a politically driven church member, regardless of what political agenda that church represents.

## Application

- Is your church a place where people come to be prepared to be sent out into the world or a place where people come to escape the world?
- How can your church shift from acting from the privilege of the host to the vulnerability of the guest?

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