

So far in Matthew, Jesus has been busy. Looking back from this week's reading, we can understand why Jesus would send the 12. He's been healing like crazy: Two blind men have received sight, one who was mute speech, a woman suffering from hemorrhages healed, a girl raised from the dead, and a paralyzed man walks. And that's just chapter 9!

So yes, "the harvest is plentiful," he says, "but the laborers are few." So he gets the 12 ready to go and do the same: "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons," In other words, to tell and show the people that "the kingdom of heaven has come near."

But he's sure to tell them before they go: "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves..." "You will be hated by all," he tells them, "because of my name." It won't just be telling the good news and showing signs of its coming, it will also mean persecution and suffering.

Our readings today are focused here, on the consequences of being disciples of Christ. Jeremiah has become a laughingstock, denounced and maligned for preaching the word of God. The Psalmist declares, "I have become a stranger to my kindred, an alien to my mother's children" and while "[Z]eal for your house has consumed me; the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."

This message of ours, given to us by Christ to give to others, is counter cultural. It goes against the accepted “grain” of society. It calls into question “business as usual” and calls the world on many of the actions and systems that are deemed acceptable. So those of us who are charged with speaking “Jesus” out there (that’s every one of us in this room), it’s going to be an uphill battle. Jesus is giving it to us plain - going against that grain will be hard and suffering is assured.

But did you hear those words from Jeremiah? “O Lord, you have enticed me... you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.” He goes on “If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.” Jeremiah can’t help it. **There is something about speaking what the Lord has given him to say - like for us, proclaiming the good news - that simply will not let him go.**

Now, Jeremiah was around long before Paul, but Paul had some very similar experiences as Jeremiah. Being an apostle was hard on Paul - he was arrested, accused, tried and imprisoned. But Paul kept going - for there was something about this message, about this Jesus, that simply would not let him go. I think our reading from Romans is part of that force, that message, that compelled him so - specifically, the message that death no longer has dominion over Jesus and that, because of our unity with Jesus through baptism, it no longer has dominion over us.

Do you find that word compelling? Does that word drive you to proclaim the gospel publically? Does it empower you to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and cast out demons, all in the name of Jesus? Does it compel you enough to do all this in full view of a society that will meet it with hostility? Jesus makes it pretty clear that this is what discipleship and apostleship are supposed to look like. And, in a society petrified of death that dispenses it every chance it gets, being unafraid of death would least help one persist in sharing this news.

Two men have been on my mind this week. One was Lutheran and the other named after Luther. But I know I'm only permitted some of your attention Sunday mornings so I'll focus on just one.

Martin Luther King Jr. started his career as a pastor. But in 1955, when the civil rights movement got its kick start with Rosa Parks and the bus boycott in Montgomery Alabama, this young and articulate preacher was thrust into the role of leader. He was not out for fame or glory, not in it for the notoriety that would come. You might even say he was reluctant to be out front.

But chose to lead he did.

In his autobiography, King spoke of the moment when, despite the death threats, the arrests and the harassment, he decided to take up that cross. Late at night the phone rang and the caller threatened him and his family. "It seemed that all my fears had come down on me at once," he writes.

I had reached the saturation point... I couldn't take it any longer. I was weak. Something said to me, "You can't call on Daddy now, you can't even call on Mama. You've got to call on that something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way. (78)

So sitting down at his kitchen table, he prayed and eventually heard a voice in reply: "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world..." That was the word King needed, and it set him on a path that would eventually lead to his death.

There were many miles between that kitchen table and the hotel balcony in Memphis where he was murdered. By the time he gave the "I have a dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in '63, his popularity was greater than that of President Lyndon B Johnson. But five years later, dying on that balcony, he was virtually despised by those who'd supported him and his cause. What happened in those last five years that brought King to his death?

What began just a month before the start of that bus boycott in Montgomery was the War in Vietnam. His “I have a dream speech” in ‘63 marked a turning point for King. It put him on a national stage. The legislative end of discrimination based on race, and the passing of the voting rights act a year later were critical moments and important events. But King’s gaze was widening beyond the injustice facing African Americans to include a broader population.

He began talking about the violence of poverty. His focus and commitment to non-violence was growing beyond the bounds of what legislative victories could be won, beyond the socially accepted fight against systemic racism, to include poverty, the suffering of the working poor, and the expensive war funneling money from social programs and producing a generation of men broken by what their country required of them. The color of suffering still mattered but it was time to open the fight up to include every color. So he started talking about Vietnam and calling for an end to the war.

By the time of his speech ‘Beyond Vietnam’ in ‘67, his popularity numbers were down there with Jeremiah’s. But what mattered more to King was to obey the calling he received at his kitchen table all those years ago - to stand for righteousness, to stand for justice. The thing is, that calling had led him to a very different place than where he was when he first received it, and that was plain to see in this speech. The call of God was the same, but its shape had changed, its scope had deepened and widened. The truths to which his commitments led him were violently unpopular, but the God who called him to speak and speak bravely would not let him go. And a year to the day after that speech, King was shot and killed leaving his Memphis hotel room.

Jesus knew that the message and work he sent the disciples to proclaim and do would change them, 'form' them into the people he called them to be. What we get in this reading from Matthew is the image of Jesus preparing them for the other side, the far end of that formation. The end where the prophet Jeremiah finds himself, where the apostle Paul finds himself, the place where the message of God's promise and purpose for all who speak and suffer as a result had taken them.

Jesus did not tell them that they would return vilified, that they might no longer get along with their families and friends. Would they have gone if they'd known? The grip of this calling of ours is firm, as firm as it was for Jeremiah, Paul and Jesus himself. But as they each show us, when we answer the call it promises not only to never let us go, but to change us, to form us, to deepen our faith and our utter and complete reliance on God.

This is the life of faith. It costs something dear, but it promises a life as rich and full as it will be hard. It may end in the cross, as it did for King, as it did for Jesus. But the God who has claimed and called us through the waters of baptism makes a way where there is no way. Death no longer has dominion, beloved, and so we are freed to stand for righteousness and justice, whatever the death promised by a world intent on it. For "Lo," we hear, "I will be with you always, to the end of the age.

AMEN