

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
2 July 2023

Matthew 10: 40-42

Welcome to Missionary Sunday. The passage from Matthew 10 today comes at the very end of the chapter and it speaks about the rewards for those who receive the disciples of Christ when they come to them as representatives of Christ. Now, let us review this great missionary chapter in Matthew.

- a. The Chapter begins at 10:1-4 when Mathew gives us the name of the twelve apostles and tells us something about their mission. Jesus gave the twelve “authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.
- b. In verses 5-15, Jesus sent them out two by two. He says, “Go nowhere but to the lost sheep of Israel. Proclaim the good news (the kingdom has come very near), cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers... Take no gold, silver, or copper, no bag for your journey, no two tunics, or a staff...if a house is worthy and receives you, let your peace come upon it...if anyone will not welcome you or listen to you, shake off the dust from your feet a you leave the town. Truly I tell you, it would be better for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement.
- c. In verses 16-23, Jesus warns them of the dangers they are to encounter, “I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves... They will hand you over to councils and flog you in your synagogues, you will be dragged before Governors because of me... brother will betray brother to death... but the one who endures will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to another town...
- d. In verses 24-32, Jesus asks them not to fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul and gives them an example of a sparrow. The disciples are more valuable than many sparrows and God knows every hair of their heads. He ends that section by saying those who acknowledge me, I will acknowledge, and those who deny me, I will deny.
- e. In verses 34-39 Jesus makes it clear that his Gospel means to turn things inside out, “I do not come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword, Father will be set against son, daughter against mother, etc.’ Those whoa re not willing to prioritize Jesus above parents or children, and family connections are not worthy of the kingdom. Those who will find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Jesus’ sake will find it.

- f. Then in the passage today, Jesus talks about the rewards: Those who welcome the disciples, welcome him, and the one who sent him. And those who welcome the disciples will receive the reward of their presence, their preaching, their healing, their connection to God, etc. Those who give even a cup of water to them will not lose their reward.

We have hundreds of books with titles like, “When Sheep Attack,” or “The Toxic Congregation,” or “5 Dumb Things Churches do,” or “Ministry Killers,” etc., etc. What these titles suggest is that ministry is as difficult today as it has always been. According to theologian Cleophus LaRue, form Princeton Theological Seminary, “Some denominations report that over 50% of their clergy leave ordained ministry within five years of their ordination. Others stay out of necessity but lose much of the joy that initially filled their hearts for Christian ministry.” The main reason for this attrition in ministry is burn-out, or as LaRue puts it, “The unyielding demands of congregants on their ministers and servants of the work of God.”

The ministry field is filled with people who are hurting. In fact Jesus says, “Those who are well are in no need of a doctor, but those who are sick.” Most ministers I know are fully aware of this fact. Pastoral care and love of our parishioners is at the core of much of what we do, and most of us consider it a blessing and a privilege. When most of us leave seminary, we are so eager to serve and love God’s people that no sacrifice seems too large and no task too difficult. The sad reality, however, is that I have seen many seminarians and newly ordained priests who head out for their ministries with great joy and enthusiasm, but little by little I see many of them become overwhelmed with the weight of responsibility and the cost of caring. Many of them show diminished hopes and dashed expectations about ministry. They deal with these conflicts by becoming technocrats: By repeating memorized words on Sunday mornings, putting a minimal efforts at sermon preparation, by spending more and more time at their desks, and by frantically looking for a purple shirt because they see bishops as having it so much better (they don’t!) and by serving time day after day, until they can retire.

Although some of the responsibility for this burn-out falls on the priest himself or herself, research shows that many congregations have such inflated and unrealistic ministry descriptions, that even Jesus of Nazareth would be fired within a couple of years of taking the job. “I had a birthday and never showed up for my party, my kid lost her tooth and you were not there to provide pastoral care, I couldn’t sleep last night and you didn’t answer your phone, I called you on your day off and it took you almost two hours to call me back, I wanted a sermon that could make me cry, laugh, pull out my hair in excitement, and answer all my life’s questions, but you didn’t deliver!” And these are just the folks who are honest enough to tell you what’s upsetting them. Many just quietly stop coming and you never see them again.

Today, Jesus says those who welcome you will have their reward. He is talking to the Apostles. Now, it is important to explain what “Welcome you” means. It doesn’t just to receive you with great enthusiasm and then forget about me. It means to support you with tangible things like housing, food, protection. It also mean to listen to your message, to engage with your ministry, to join you as fellow servants in the kingdom, to offer concrete help in the doing of the ministry. If a minister has no lay assistance, he or she hasn’t been welcomed yet. If a minister is ignored in his or her messages and the word seems to come through one ear and exit through the other, they haven’t been welcomed. If a minister is not given a realistic job description that allows for the occasional day off and time to read and pray, they haven’t been welcome. This is what Jesus calls a “cup of water.” Ministers need a cup of water; they need the opportunity to take a breath and reconnect with the joy and hope inherent in ministry.

Today, we welcome a new minister to our Church. The Reverend Leesa Lewis has been sent by God to learn from us and to minister to us. Let us welcome her and Bill, her husband, by befriending and loving them. Let us learn from her and let us train her to be an amazing pastor in God’s kingdom. Let us serve alongside her, letting her lead us, and leading her, in whatever ways God wants us to lead and be led. Take the time to listen to her story and share your own story with her. We will have done a good job, if at the end of two years of ministry Leesa is more in love with Jesus of Nazareth than she is today. We will receive the rewards of her wisdom and love and we will be obedient to God’s call for us to welcome and train her, if her enthusiasm for ministry is twice as intense in two years as it is today. If her marriage is stronger, if her faith is deeper, if her knowledge base is profound and wide, if her friendships have increased, and if she becomes the minister God wants her to become for the sake and benefit of the Church.

Today on ministry Sunday, let us pray for all missionaries, especially the team of 20 of us going to Dominican Republic next week, and let us pray for all pastors, priests, and preachers, especially those for whom ministry has become a painful journey. May God give them the refreshment and joy they need to serve him with faithfulness and passion for many years to come. Amen!