

The Power of Community

June 25, 2023

Matthew 10:24-39

Prayer: God of ancient story and present moment may the words I offer in reflection, be acceptable to you and echo your wisdom in our time. Amen

When Jesus initially called the disciples, it was a simple invitation, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men and women." It was a new job opportunity, if you will, and Jesus took them through a training period. They sat at his feet. They learned from him. They watched him perform miracles. They went with him to the highways and the byways, and they began to understand what this ministry - that Jesus came to do - was all about. It was a time where they could ask questions and he would answer.

But beginning in chapter 10, the chapter were we find this morning passage, Matthew, shows us that something changes. The disciples move from being those who sit with Jesus and learn from Jesus to now **being sent** forth into the world. Jesus sends them out to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons - to be about the work of ministry, to be about the business of working along side the Divine. To be about the work of justice making and loving those on the edges.

Jesus tells them, "It's serious work. And as you go out, I need you to understand some things. I need you to undergo a radical reorientation of how you look at life, at how you look at this mission. You're going to go out with this amazing ministry, but don't think that life is going to be any different for you than it has been for me. The student is not greater than the teacher. The servant is not greater than the master." There's a temptation to sometimes believe that when Jesus calls us to follow him, to live in relationship with the Divine, that it somehow creates for us a zone of acceptance, a zone of comfort, a zone of chosen-ness – to some extent it does - but life is life and it is filled with challenges – just as Jesus life was filled with – cross heavy challenges – we too will sometimes live the challenges that Jesus had to live with.

Jesus does not call us into a ministry of tributes and popularity. It is not a ministry of good fortune and comfort, we will not be exempt from public ridicule and opposition. Jesus calls us in this passage from the gospel of Matthew to understand – discipleship can come at a cost. The passage is a call to be faithful even when the world turns against us, even when the world rejects us.

If we're honest, no one likes opposition. No one likes to try to “do what they feel called to do” and have to deal with opposition on every hand. No one wants to have roadblocks; no one wants to be accused of things that are not their intent. But Jesus is saying to the disciples, "Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of those who will oppose you, for your life is so much more valuable than you can even imagine." If you are to live the way of Jesus, you will place yourself in the presence of opposition.

We know this to be true here at McClure. We have been very intentional in our welcome to all people - in-particular we have been intentional about our welcome of

those of the LGBTQ 2plus community - we believe God's love is for all people and that all people are created in God's image. In 2020 someone took offense to this welcome and spray painted our church doors with a homophobic slur. The building was closed due to Covid - so very few saw the orange spray paint. On Mother's day 2020 after the damage was noticed several of us, the Chair of the Board, the ministry team, our families and a few others came over to clean up the mess. Discipleship can be costly.

In 1935, the United Church of Canada chose to ordain women and this act of inclusion caused quite a stir. Some believed women were to be, as children back then, seen but not heard. But deep in its heart the church knew that women, could and should proclaim God's word and lead the church. If Lydia, and Mary who shared the news of the empty tomb with the other disciples, and the woman at the Well could tell of God's busy ness in the world why couldn't women in 1935 be ordained in the United Church of Canada. It was a controversial decision, and some picked up their marbles and went elsewhere. The conversation divided churches – it divided families. Discipleship can be costly.///

Most scholars think that the Gospel of Matthew was the earliest of the gospels written 50 to 80 years after Jesus death. As the writer of Matthew was sitting down to record his memories of life with Jesus, the little community of believers that had formed the church - was in deep trouble. They had had a few years of living as followers of Jesus under their belt and their "way" flew in the face of the society around them. Jesus had taught them for example that a gospel community was a group in which every person was seen as equal in the eyes of God. The society around them was strongly committed to the order of the empire which subjugated women and promoted slavery - among other things. When a little group of Christians created a community in which women and slaves and people from other countries all gathered together to make decisions jointly and to support and lead the community, well they were living in opposition to the order of the empire. As the message caught on and the little group began to grow, their strange and seemingly chaotic way of living in community, this little church, started to feel threatening to the empire around them. Matthew's community was living with the reality of Jesus predictions – to follow Jesus Way - will be costly.

Because they called themselves Christians many of them had been disowned by their families, they had lost jobs and social status. They had been banished in their communities and now, by the time Matthew, was writing things down - things were getting dangerous. Being a Christian meant you might very well end up facing a hungry lion in the Colosseum, turned into government leaders by people you knew and loved, neighbors, friends, colleagues, even your own family members. This is precisely why the church was so important. If you make a choice to follow Jesus, to live in constant and stark opposition to everything acceptable around you, well then you better not be doing that all alone. Nobody, you see, can live a life that is radically different from the world around them, all by themselves.

That is why I'm here. How about you?

I need you - I need you to stand beside me when and I'm cleaning hate messages off the front doors of our church. And when others look at me sideways and say o she is a minister – and she is a minister in that church.

And I need to stand beside you - who are also trying to live Jesus way because this society we live in is sneaky in its ability to lead us down the garden path. I am easily distracted from Jesus way, to a way that ignores human need and encourages me to take care of only my self. I need you to remind me whose I am and that we are called to follow a way that is not always popular or easy.

We need this place, Matthew, the gospel writer knew the power of community, the power of church and so do we.

It's not easy, but Jesus is sending us on a mission. He's sending us to go and to be about the work of curing the sick and raising the dead, of bringing new life to the outcasts, of creating justice for all people. And he sends us knowing that it will be hard and messy and uncomfortable but we will discover the depths of new life there. I pray we might continue to walk side by side on Jesus way – celebrating each other, leaning on each other, and holding each other up – particularly when the world around us pushes back.

Amen.

Rev. Debra Berg