

*Second Sunday after Pentecost*

June 18, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Sam Wolff

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew. (Matthew 9:35-10:1-23)

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These 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; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes."

The Gospel of our Lord.

That was a difficult lesson to even read. I'm sure it was a difficult lesson to hear on this Father's Day. And it's a really difficult lesson to preach on. And so I read it and reread it, and just prayed about what is Jesus really saying here. And I think it comes down to one word, and that's "discipleship."

The context for this reading, as was stated in the beginning, is when Jesus sends out the twelve into the world to witness in his name.

Last week, we had the Gospel of, “*go ye therefore into all the land,*” you know, teaching and preaching and baptizing. And it was really a good-feeling sermon. You know, hey, we’re saints of God. We can go out there.

But then this week the hammer comes down. And the call today is a rough one. It calls for the narrow road, the road less traveled. This week’s hard lesson is what happens when we actually go out as disciples, or at least what can happen. And Jesus warns us that going out in his name is not always very popular. And he says, in very plain language, that there is often a price to pay.

When we look at our history as Christians, I think we can in some cases really hold our heads high, as we look back at all the people who have fought, and in some cases died, for our faith.

In more recent times I think of Martin Luther King, who paid the ultimate price for trying to bring justice in God’s reign here in our country. Living in Africa, Nelson Mandela is a huge hero of mine. He also paid the price for simply trying to give voice to his people. He spent most of his life in prison.

As Lutherans, we look up to Martin Luther. And I think we often forget the very costly price that he had to pay. For years of his life he was hunted down like an animal.

We continue to respond when we go into Africa, respond to the Ebola crisis, or the AIDS crisis. We have missionaries, we have medical workers, who die and never come home. Work among refugees and disasters are often a peril. Civil rights, we did pretty good as a church, because whites marched with blacks in the name of God, and blacks marched with whites. And many of those people also paid a tremendous price.

When I was in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, I worked out in a little village. And it was a difficult journey out there, so I would spend the night. And in the evening, the cool evening, I would like to walk around the cemetery that was there. And what I really noticed was all the missionaries who had died. Little Anna Schmidt, two years old, died. Or Guenter, Pastor Guenter, died at the age of twenty-three. And on and on these gravestones would read. And it really hit me what discipleship looked like fifty years before I went out.

We, as Christians, don’t have some things to celebrate, because we have often failed. It took centuries for the church to really recognize slavery and speak out against it. We still struggle with things like racism, or equal rights for gays or minorities. We have had our walks of shame as well. And I think we dare not bury our failures lest we are tempted to follow the easy road again.

Jesus says, as he opens up this dialogue, that the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. And through these few words, Christ invited the disciples, as he invites

us this morning, to be a disciple. He makes it clear that there may be a cost and that the call to discipleship is not easy. Remember the story of the rich young ruler. He comes to Jesus: "What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus says, "What does the law say?" And he rattles off the law. He knows it. And then Jesus says, "You know, you said this right. But there is one more thing. Sell everything you have and follow me." The young man couldn't make that final step, couldn't pay the cost of discipleship.

And like that man, we also have the right to decline. We may have a good excuse, and then we'll be safe, but we will also be empty and hungry. We will still be good people. We just won't be disciples, because discipleship is a choice that we have to make. And I keep going back to this costly thing, because Jesus really warns us about this. And I think that there is probably no better example in our times, you know, it goes back fifty or sixty years now, than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, who stood up to the regime in Hitler and just said, "No, this is not right. This is not God's will." And he was executed shortly thereafter. But right before he was executed, he wrote about grace, as it relates to discipleship. He said, "Grace can be cheap if there is no discipleship that goes with it." "True grace," he says, "is following the call to discipleship and then accepting the true grace that God gives us, which is life-everlasting." The life of Bonhoeffer is a compelling statement of what it means to follow Christ.

All this talk that I have been doing about martyrs, people willing to die, people willing to suffer, carrying a cross, it can sound a bit melodramatic, sitting here in the air-conditioned church this morning, because, after all, we're pretty ordinary people, and rarely, if ever, are we presented with these great choices or difficult decisions that we have to make. And yet, in a way we are, because every day we have choices to be a disciple in the way we live, in what we stand for, or against. In all of these seemingly small, insignificant ways, we can be a disciple for Christ. In a world where security and comfort is so important, it is often placed before justice for others. What's our choice? What's our choice and what's our prayer? In a world where prejudice and bigotry can hide behind slogans that sound so nice, what's our response?

Right now there is a human tragedy, one of the greatest ever, in the refugee crisis, and this affects us. And what are we going to do about that? What's our call as a disciple to respond to this? What about simply the way we live with materialism? Have we chosen or do we choose to just be another cog in the wheel of materialism? Or can we say to ourselves, "You know, there are areas where I can live just a bit more simply so that others might simply live."

What about our Christian witness? Do we even believe in that anymore? Or do we go out on the highways and byways and share this tremendous love and grace that we receive? We're not trying to beat people over the head and make them Christians, but to just share the good news through the way we live, the way we act.

We think we have ordinary lives. And yet we in some ways, in many ways, we have the same life that the disciples had. And we live in the same world that they lived. We live among intolerance and hate.

This past week, a man walks into a baseball practice and starts shooting people because he didn't like their politics. A boy, who was scarcely twenty years old, last year walked into a church in South Carolina and started shooting people because of the color of their skin.

In our own community, an African-American man was shot by a police officer. He was killed. And I am glad I wasn't on that jury because I don't know who is right and who is wrong. But I do know that one person is dead and the other person's life is totally destroyed. He and his family will never be the same. And so something is wrong here. And, as people of faith, we are called to do something.

So many of the problems seem absolutely overwhelming. It seems impossible to heal divisions, and stop war, and feed the hungry. And so "overwhelmed," I think, is a very good word to associate with discipleship.

But here is another way to look at that word. We're overwhelmed with problems, yes. But we are also overwhelmed with opportunity. We have opportunity to be that church which is visible, and thus a witness to the kingdom of God, right here at Immanuel in St. Paul. We have overwhelming opportunity presented to us to be a laborer in the village. It may mean we have to sacrifice a bit or change the way we live, how we think, how we vote, what we say. It may mean that we have to reorganize the priorities within our lives. But we are not powerless to answer the call to discipleship.

I hope nobody out in the congregation this morning thinks I'm standing up here and pointing to you, or pointing to myself, or pointing to the church at large, and saying, "Boy, have we ever failed!" No, I'm not. I could stand here for hours and hours and talk about all the good that you have done here at Immanuel, that we have done worldwide as the church, with all the challenges that we have accepted in the name of Our Lord.

But then we're not there yet. And so we have to continue to pray that we follow Christ, and in our own way we are faithful disciples. And when that call comes, when we're asked to be a disciple, we respond to that bugle call and accept the cost of discipleship, whatever that might mean in our lives.

Amen.