The Third Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 6—Year A
Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35-10:8 (9-23)

This is one of those gospels where the rubber meets the road.

Jesus is traveling all about, **going to cities and villages** alike. He's **teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom**. He's **curing every disease and every sickness**. And he's **drawing crowds** everywhere. **When he sees them, he has compassion for them, because they are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.** So many people in so much need, and Jesus knows that it's more need than he can get to. *He knows he needs help.* He knows the **harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few**. Yes, ***even Jesus needs help***, and even **Jesus has to ask the Lord of the harvest to send that help**. That's kind of a nice corrective for those of us who struggle to ask for help. *If even Jesus has to get help, why do we ever think we can go it alone?*

Then Jesus does an amazing, and quite vulnerable thing, he **summons his twelve disciples, and he gives them authority, power, over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness**. Jesus takes **all the authority and power that he has from God**, and *he hands it over, shares it, fully and completely, with his disciples.*

Jesus then gives them really specific instructions:

- **"Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but rather go to the lost sheep of Israel."** That sounds a little exclusionary; really Jesus, only some people get to hear the good news? But what if Jesus is saying, *"Go local. Start with those closest to you."*

  Sometimes, it's far easier to get caught up in the adrenaline of the national voices screaming at each other than it is to actually engage a neighbor, or a co-worker, or a family member in a real conversation that has all kinds of layers.

  When people are up close, it's far harder to dismiss them out-of-hand because we're all, as a former bishop of mine used to say, we're all complex critters. Until we actually engage with those closest to us and risk the **messiness of proximity**, how can we think about being agents of change in the nation or the world?

Second instruction:

- **"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."**

  Whatever the **kingdom of heaven** is, it's got to look like **good news** for those
  - who **can't imagine wholeness and wellness**;
  - it's got to look like **life**, **abundant life**, for **those who feel dead**;
  - it's got to look like **belonging** for those whose **very existences puts them beyond the bounds of community in the eyes of the world**;
  - it's got to look like **really engaging with people's demons** and being relentless in **seeking freedom from all those things that possess us**.

  *What might this look like **locally**?*

- Maybe finding concrete ways to support the **Community Care Clinic**?
- Maybe **paying attention** to those whose eyes have lost that spark, who walk like the dead, who just seem to be **going through the motions in life** and **inviting them to claim their gifts and passions and purpose**?
- Maybe **thinking about those who feel on the margins** and **giving them an unequivocal welcome**? Maybe making sure we **show up as people of faith with love and welcome** at things like the **Pride Walk** later today or **other spaces** where **voices in the larger society** are saying, **"You don't belong here."**
- Maybe supporting the work of the **Community Mental Health Project** that has been going for the last two years and the **Multi-Faith component of this work** that is just starting (see me after church if you want to get involved in this work)?

Not all of us are equipped or called to all of these, but the **crowds are so varied and the needs are so great that *all* of us are called to some part of this work**—remember, the **body of Christ has many members, many parts**, and ***all*** of them are needed **to do the work he has given us to do**. There are **a lot of concrete ways** we can ***proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near and has neither forgotten you, nor left you behind.***

Third set of instructions:

- This is **not transactional**; this is **not for sale**. **You received without payment; you give without payment.**
- **Travel light—no gold, silver, copper, bag, no extra tunic, sandals, or staff.** The **people you are going among, those who long to hear this good news—they'll take care of you**, and it's always **humbling** when they share what they have with you. **Receive it and know what true communion looks like**, *not on terms of what "**I** have to bestow upon you," but on terms of what "**we** can enjoy together."*

Then Jesus gives some good solid wisdom:

- **You need a home base; a place that is congruous with this work you are trying to do.** That's what a **worthy house** looks like; it's a place where the **values align with these kingdom values**. When you **find that place**, **base your work there**. You **go out from that place empowered**; you **return to that place to get your tank filled, so that you can go out again**. And when you find that **home base**, you **bless it with your peace**.
- And from time to time, you're **going to experience values that just don't align**. **Don't give it energy**. **Let your peace return to you and move on**. There are **so many people longing for the good news**; **don't get hung up in those places that aren't ready to receive it and align their lives with it**.

Then Jesus delivers a really hard reality check:

- There's going to be some **people downright hostile to this good news**. Yep, **I'm sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves** (and we all know how that turns out for the sheep). So, you've got to **be wise as serpents and innocent as doves**. You've got to be **clear-eyed and on your game,** *and* you've got **remain open, receptive;** you've got to **be agents of peace, healers**.
- You've got to **attentive and alert**, and just know that if you stick your head out and **really engage this work that I'm asking you to do**, the **powers-that-be will hand you over to their councils; religious folk will call you to task; they'll even drag you before governors and kings**. In other words, this is **public work with public ramifications and consequences**.

- ***When this happens***, not *if* this happens, but **when this happens, don't worry about what you are to say.** If you wait until you know how to answer every conceivable rebuttal to this good news, you will never ever start to share it. **Don't worry about your response** to the questions that will surely come, **what you are to say will be given to you at that time**. It **won't be you who is speaking, but the Spirit of God speaking through you**—you can count on it.
- And this ***isn't just public work with public consequences***, but this is **deeply intimate work with deeply personal implications**. **This kingdom good news can cause unbelievable division, even in families**. **Siblings, parents, children can all turn on one another**. ***Jesus doesn't give us resolution on this.*** I really wish he did, but he doesn't. He just lets us know that **this happens**.

  Why does this good news for the sick, the dead, the excluded, and the demon-possessed cause such division among our closest relations?

  Maybe it has something to do with **our fear of those things outside of our experience or understanding**.

  Maybe it has something to do with what **truly embracing this good news for all will demand of us**. It will **demand that we relinquish power and control** *and* **seek mercy and grace instead**, and **mercy and grace always knock us off our footing** because when you **receive these**, ***you know they come from way beyond you.*** In a world that is **so chaotic** and **tumultuous** and **unsteady**, some of us **would rather cling to control**, shored up by **the worth *we* have worked so hard for**, than **freefall into the arms of pure, unmerited grace.**

In the end, all we've got going for us is the fact that Jesus has given us the authority and power to do these things.

We **travel light**, but we **go *in* the name of Jesus**, ***in* the power of Jesus**, ***with* the authority of Jesus**, ***bearing* the love of Jesus**, ***with* the Spirit of God fueling our words**, ***sending* us out into our community**, out **into the High Country**, to **heal**, to **raise up**, to **reconnect**, to **reconcile**, to **do battle with the demons** that are **wreaking such destruction on individuals and on our society**.

How will the world ever know the kingdom of heaven has come near if we don't show, in our lives and with our words, what that kingdom looks like?

Today, **Jesus commissions you**, and **Jesus commissions me**, to **head out into the crowds**, *with* ***compassion***, **wise as serpents and innocent as doves**, and ***to know***, that **through this work amongst *all* of these people**, ***we will be saved* and *discover the kingdom of heaven as well***. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
June 18, 2023