

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**  
**May 15, 2022**  
**Matthew 9:35–10:14**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept you Word. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding that our hearts and minds may be opened. Silence in us any voices but your own, so that we may hear your Word and also do it, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Then 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 Zealot, 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.

It is the fifth Sunday of Easter in the fifth month of the third year of the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century after the reports of Jesus resurrection changed the world. And yet there is still disruption, confusion, and injustice throughout creation that is seemingly immeasurable and daunting.<sup>1</sup>

Another mass shooting motivated by hate in Buffalo, N.Y., multiple shootings in an entertainment district in Milwaukee, more grim news of atrocities in Ukraine and continued war, more hateful anti-trans laws that target vulnerable children being passed or considered, the threat of women losing bodily autonomy and a right they have had for more than 50 years, climate disasters, and a pandemic that won't seem to go away with numbers increasing again and yet another variant that is very contagious. We are, again, like sheep in need of a shepherd.

I find the story in Matthew pretty challenging. Often, when I read scripture, I try to imagine myself in the story, what role might I identify with? Is it as one of the people who are suffering, maybe? But I'm not sure, Jesus has been teaching, feeding, and healing the crowds. They haven't been treated well by the existing religious leaders and community of faith. They are harassed, hungry, and helpless. Certainly, there are times when I need compassion and support, but I don't know,

and that's never a comfortable place to be for me. I'd rather be the one to support and help than be the one receiving help.

Maybe, then, I look to identify with one of the religious leaders. But that's always tricky. Jesus rarely has anything nice to say about them. In our story for today, that is certainly true. Jesus calls the religious leaders out for not taking care of the people. Possibly I could identify there because certainly there are those times when I feel like I'm not living up to the call as a religious leader, but where is the good news there?

Maybe then, I should look toward the disciples. This motley crew that Jesus has called together. That tends to be where I want to identify, as a faithful disciple following Jesus. But then again, Matthew takes the time to list the names of these disciples, and I remember maybe they aren't such good role models after all. Peter who will betray Jesus. Thomas who is skeptical and can't be found in important moments. Judas who will betray Jesus. Matthew who works as a tax collector with the oppressive empire. Simon the zealot who might be seen as a terrorist or radical. I'm not so sure about this bunch.

Then there is the challenge Jesus puts forth, moving this motley group from disciple to apostle, from one who follows to ones who are sent out. Jesus tells them that he needs help. As I said, I'm always willing to help. But Jesus sends the twelve out with instructions and a warning that make me nervous. He tells them to go without packing for the trip. And then he tells them that they will do the very things that he has done, proclaim the good news, cure the sick, raise the dead.

While I will often seek to locate myself in a story, to see what character I identify most with when reading scripture, I can be fairly certain it's never Jesus, and yet, these instructions that Jesus gives the disciples seem, rather Jesus-y. Not only are the disciples in this story sent out *by* Jesus, but they are also sent out to the people *as* Jesus. The laborers are

few and the harvest is plenty says Jesus. He needs help, so he gives them the authority to do all the things he is doing, all the things the current religious structures and leaders are failing to do.

If that isn't challenging enough, directly after the passage I read earlier, Jesus tells them because of the things they will be doing, because of the healing, wholeness, and good news they will bring, they will get in trouble. People will attack them, revile them, persecute them. It's possible it won't go well. And the very people that will mistreat the disciples, well, it's their people. Jesus has told them not to go to outsiders, not to go too far away, but to do this work among the people around them, to do the work among their own people, among their own faith community. This transforming work of Jesus that heals, reconciles, and restores, well, it's not always well received.

So, where to look? Well, the beauty of scripture, the beauty of story, is that we have all of these places to look. There can be a potential word for us in any of these places.

Perhaps you are in a place where you need help, and you need to know that Jesus has compassion and empathy for you, for us. And not just that, but that he invites and commissions people into the work of healing and restoration. That despite all the endless news of violence and hopelessness, that there are people working to counteract all of it. That there are people out in the world doing the work of justice and healing, of binding up the brokenhearted and walking with people in their grief. As Mister Rogers is frequently quoted in times of disaster, "look for the helpers." In scary times, you will always find people helping.

But perhaps looking for the helpers isn't the word you need to hear. Maybe you are a person that needs to remember the call of the disciples to be a helper. And more particularly that this call comes to a variety of people, some seemingly that aren't at all qualified, or at the very least

seem an odd choice. Maybe part of the reminder is that it takes a lot of us, and that in the community of helpers there may be some people you don't get along with particularly well, but that the focus is on the work and not the personalities. I imagine that Matthew the Tax Collector and Simon the zealot had some pretty strong disagreements with one another. And yet, Jesus called both of them to be a part of his fellowship, to be a part of the work of bringing good news and healing to those that need it.

And maybe it's a reminder for some of us that following isn't the true calling, that being out front, being in the lead is where we are being called. Jesus initially addresses the twelve as disciples, which means one who follows. But he quickly calls them apostles, which is one who leads, one who is sent out. Jesus gives these apostles a commission to go out and do the work of Jesus, as Jesus' representatives, to do the same work that Jesus has already been doing. There is a lot of work to be done Jesus tells them, and he needs help. He needs people to go out into the world to join in the work.

Or maybe it's a reminder that we may not always feel prepared for the work, or that we aren't equipped with everything we need. As part of the commission of the twelve, Jesus tells them not to worry about what they might need because it will be provided for them. Later in the story, Jesus also tells them not to worry about what to say if they are brought before the authorities because the Holy Spirit will be with them and will provide the words. How many of us have felt ill-equipped and under-prepared for a task of ministry, but have also found that it worked out fine and we had what we needed all along? Sometimes even remarkably so, where the Spirit was at work, and we were able to accomplish more than we thought we could.

And maybe, maybe you are the person who needs the reminder that the main thing should be the main thing. Maybe you need to hear the hard but necessary word that you are not focused on the thing you should be focused on. That maybe you are focused on the rules or the right procedures or the status quo and not the people in need. Maybe you need to be reminded that the job is not to prop up the structures of the institution, but that the structure exists for a higher purpose. Maybe the structures that exist are actually doing more harm than good and need to be changed or dismantled. Perhaps you need the reminder of the mission.

Maybe you need to hear the permission that not all causes or concerns are yours to undertake. Jesus tells the disciples that there may be times when they are not welcomed, where they are not well received. He tells them to shake the dust from their feet and move on. Maybe not everyone will be receptive to what you have to say or what you have to give. Perhaps they will hear it a different way from someone else. Perhaps we need to be reminded that we can spend our time and resources in ways that are life-giving. Not every fire is yours to put out. Let someone else attend to it, focus on where and how you can make a difference.

Maybe you are a person who needs to hear that all of this starts with compassion. That this compassion starts with a visceral care and concern for the other. God's calling, Jesus' ministry that we are invited into, starts with compassion and empathy. Your gut is correct, your desire to help is correct. Your empathy and concern are correct. This is how God made us, to have compassion, Christ-like compassion. The risen Christ calls us into the world for restoration and reconciliation. The risen Christ calls us into the world to offer good news and invite others to share in it.

I know things can seem daunting. It is easy to focus on all that is wrong. But as author and pastor John Pavlovitz has said, “The truth is, dear friend: there are far more people in this place working for equality, diversity, love, and justice than opposing them, and it isn’t even close. There are hundreds of millions of people in this world who (just like you) wake up every day trying to be the kind of person the world needs; lavish with compassion, overflowing with generosity, relentless with love. You are, even when you’re not aware of it, surrounded on all sides by like-hearted people who are not okay with the suffering and ugliness around them either.”<sup>ii</sup>

Maybe you feel overwhelmed. Go anyway. Jesus and so many others are with you.

Maybe you need some help as well. Go anyway. Jesus and so many others are with you.

Maybe you have never done something like this before. Go anyway. Jesus and so many others are with you.

Maybe you feel ill-equipped. Go anyway. Jesus and so many others are with you.

Maybe you don’t like some of the people you are called to work alongside. Go anyway. Jesus and so many others are with you.

Maybe you someone will not like what you are doing. Go anyway. Jesus and so many others are with you.

Maybe you have failed before, and you might fail again. Go anyway. Jesus and so many others are with you.

Maybe you lost sight for a while of why the work is important and you needed a reminder of the mission. Go anyway. Jesus and so many others are with you.

Maybe you can only focus on one thing. Go anyway. Jesus and so many others are with you.

Maybe you aren't sure that what you do will actually make a difference. Go anyway. Jesus and so many others are with you.

The One whose steadfast love endures forever is with us. In this chaotic world, God is with us and continues to send Spirit-filled people in the name of Jesus to share the good news, heal the sick, correct injustice, to restore the broken-hearted, to transform the world. We are co-workers with Christ and with one another. Our labor will not be in vain. No matter the circumstance, go anyway. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> This idea for dating the world in this way was inspired by Joy J. Moore, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/a-living-word-when-we-cant-breathe>

<sup>ii</sup> [https://johnpavlovitz.com/2017/08/10/hopelessness-trending-head/?fbclid=IwAR0DJuE1kGglAsEBvqui3SeR4T\\_\\_GIsB7RQSMnd8AH6jFhmuwNIVHPd1Sdw](https://johnpavlovitz.com/2017/08/10/hopelessness-trending-head/?fbclid=IwAR0DJuE1kGglAsEBvqui3SeR4T__GIsB7RQSMnd8AH6jFhmuwNIVHPd1Sdw)