

The kingdom of God is here and now

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Matthew 9:35—10:8

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 the 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 Alpheus and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaen, 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.

The gospel of the Lord. (Praise to you O Christ).

Good morning everyone! While I couldn't have imagined back in February when I was preparing for LCM Sunday that I would be with you all at this time and in this way, I am grateful to be worshipping with you in this virtual capacity. My name is Mara. I graduated from the University of Minnesota this spring with my bachelor's in elementary education. For the past three years, I was a servant leader in Lutheran Campus Ministries--a college ministry which embodies full heartedness on a campus whose mission is focused on its students being driven to discover.

As a senior this past year, I found myself reflecting on my time spent at the U, and LCM has played a key role in helping me to find a sense of belonging on a campus where I could have been easily lost amongst a sea of people. So, I wanted to say thank you for the ways in which your congregation fuels our ministry. Know that it has transformed my life as a college student and my future as a member of the church, so thank you for your commitment to supporting the spiritual development of college students. Your impact does not go unnoticed.

When I had originally planned to preach in March, I had written a sermon around the Pharisees talking about curiosity. Because of COVID that original date didn't happen. So much in our world has happened since then, so I didn't feel like I could transplant a message that I had written in March to a new time, with a different scripture, it felt inauthentic. Instead, here are some thoughts and reflections that I will share with you on today's gospel, from my perspective as a recent college grad who has questions and fears, hopes and imaginings, and a curiosity about what the gospel proclaims to us in the here and now.

I don't think I need to tell you how turbulent our current world feels. As a recent college grad, I feel somewhat catapulted into the epicenter of it all. While recent college grads may be feeling the uncertainty of future plans in a shaky job market, I don't think a sense of uncertainty

or desire for stability is unique to us. Young kids are missing the social networks and support of their friends from school. Adults are worried about their financial futures. Communities wonder whether their cries for change will be heard. People of color are feeling the mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion of continuing a centuries old fight for justice, wondering who will become the next hashtag. There does seem to be a lot of turbulence. But I think in many ways this jolting about is also an awakening. A movement. A tumbling of pieces that have to come apart for us to put them back together to create newness and life. Communities large and small are discerning what those pieces might look like as we fight to create something new.

Unfortunately, we don't have an instruction manual to refer to. But, the gospel is always a place for us to witness God's radical love at work in the world, and today we see how Jesus is actually giving some pretty clear instructions to the disciples. Disciples at their core as followers of Jesus are meant to reflect what Jesus has called and taught them to do, both through their actions and words. One thing which I find particularly interesting, is how Jesus emphasizes in this passage, "the kingdom of heaven is near."

Every spring, LCM hosts small groups, where we get the chance to dive deep into themed conversations. On a large college campus this experience provides a really important opportunity for students to get vulnerable, and create meaningful connections with individuals. It helps to get folks plugged in, and to stay true to our LCM value of learning with one another and remaining curious. For me this helped me to see scripture from multiple perspectives, grow in my faith, and connect with others. This spring semester, our small groups focused on the Lord's prayer. Each week we would dissect a different piece. All of you, I'm assuming, know the Lord's prayer and will find this line familiar: "your kingdom come, your will be done." That particular week we

had conversations about what was the kingdom of God? What does it mean for God's will to be done?

Although we didn't reach any conclusions (because these are big questions to which we don't and won't ever have the answers), we shared similar feelings about what we thought the kingdom of God was. A lot of us had previously thought of it as this far off, unreachable thing. Or something that would come about at the end of time. But I thought to myself, where's the hope in that? As we talked, we began to think about the kingdom of God as God's word and love lived out among people. We began to see ways in which we were the kingdom of God, in which the kingdom of God maybe wasn't so distant as we first imagined.

Jesus proclaims and his disciples will echo, "the kingdom of heaven is near." At first it felt almost blasphemous to think of the kingdom of God being amongst us already, it felt like that proximity could be borderline savior complex. But I think Matthew is trying to show us that there's this overlap between kingdom and world, a space that Jesus is instructing the apostles, and us by extension to dwell in. The proximity of the kingdom of God is disciples reflecting Jesus' teachings, as students the disciples are tasked with bringing forth that message.

Although the disciple's version of this message when compared to Jesus may be messy, sometimes inaccurate, and bumpy, it's a reflection all the same. As I have reflected on George Floyd's death, I can see the disciples in me more than I would like to admit. When I think of Jesus teaching the disciples, I usually associate it with them getting it wrong at least once. The messiness of their world sometimes clouds the simplicity of what Jesus is asking them to do whether he's telling them through a parable or through his actions. As I think about the space I take up and my whiteness which clouds my own perception, I know that within this I am bound

to mess up and cause hurt too. I will continue to benefit from white supremacy. I will continue to learn and grow even if it is in painful ways. In our humanity we remain bound to brokenness.

As Matthew lists the disciples and pieces of their background in some of the first verses, we see how they come from so many different places. Their livelihoods include fishermen, tax collectors, zealots, thieves, and even religious leaders, but the overarching theme is that they were incredibly common people. I find hope in that in a lot of ways. I don't think there is a single person that isn't called into this work, into this movement, and I see this present in the disciples. Like the disciples, we too are a patchwork quilt of ordinary people called upon to be a reflection of Jesus.

This in-betweenness remains our call to love one another, but also to bring about justice, just as Jesus calls for the healing of the sick. To take care of the poor. To fight for the marginalized and oppressed. Jesus' call has always been one of radical love. And I see that emerging in so many ways in today's gospel. While the message really does seem to be that simple, so much in our world gets in the way of that. Sometimes our idea of what that love looks like turns out to be wrong. I am continuing to examine and learn how my whiteness has contributed to hurt.

So I ask myself and ask you, what does that radical love, this meeting of the kingdom and world look like today?

I can tell you where I have seen it. I've seen it in the peaceful protests of people handing out water bottles in the heat. I've seen it in high school student led protests attended by thousands. I've seen it in the venmo records of debt-ridden college students pooling together their money for weekly supply drops. I've seen it in family members admitting that their whiteness has clouded their perspectives. I've seen it on the intersection of Chicago and 38th,

filled with flowers and art, a place of community and togetherness that filled me with that reminder of the kingdom of God being near. There remain so many things that we have to re-envision. And at the end of the gospel, Jesus says he is sending us out like sheep into wolves. I don't know about you, but it's hard to willingly commit to something if I know vulnerability or risk is required. Jesus is telling us this work won't be easy. It will be challenging and messy. But God is still in and among us, and within that there is beauty.

This isn't the only gospel account of Jesus sending out the disciples. But in this version particularly, scholars have pointed out that Jesus expresses a deeper sense of urgency. I couldn't help but feel in this time of awakening and uprising within our city and the world that this similar sense of urgency must propel us forward in the work of racial justice and abolition. The kingdom of God is near, it is an ongoing moving and reckoning of God's love and justice pouring out into the world. As the disciples become defined by their participation in this movement, may we be stewards of justice who amidst our human imperfection do the challenging work to bring about God's vision for community. Amen.