

“Disciples and Apostles” – Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

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As you and I continue our daily journey in a world turned upside down, I wonder how we will confront and adapt to the many changes brought about by pandemic and social unrest that has erupted due to centuries of oppression. We come to today’s passage from Matthew’s gospel, where Jesus models the work that he calls us to do.

In his journeys, Jesus visited and taught, in cities and in villages, both places with their share of people in need – the hungry, the sick, the oppressed, the defeated. With a stubborn singlemindedness, Jesus proclaimed the good news of God’s reign. When crowds of hurting people gathered around him, desperately searching for help and hope, Jesus did not run away from them. He embraced them with compassion, he healed their broken bodies and calmed their troubled minds, and he looked upon them not with revulsion, but with love and tenderness. They lived on the margins, having no voice and having few options. They were stuck in lives in which they had little or no control over their fates.

Over and over, Jesus saw the same situations – from town to city to village. People who were poor, people who were stuck, people forgotten and overlooked by those who could have made a difference for them. But to those born with privilege and power, they were outcasts, worthless, perhaps even deserving of their fate. But in them, Jesus saw people, created in God’s image, and he had compassion on them.

Jesus shares this short parable. A great harvest of people needing to hear the good news of God’s reign, but without laborers to do the work. Without laborers to go out and bring in the harvest, the fruit would eventually rot on the ground or wither on the vine. So Jesus gathered together his 12 disciples, gave them his authority to do his work, and sent them out with a new designation. They were now apostles, given a job to do, that of proclaiming and showing God’s reign.

Disciples and apostles are not mutually exclusive. nor does one begin at one level then graduate to another. On the contrary, disciples and apostles are simply two important aspects of followers of Jesus. Disciples are learners. They are taught through the words and the model of their teacher. In proximity to their teacher, they learn the stories, the principles, the study habits to practice, the values to embrace. They become connected to their teacher and to their fellow disciples as they pursue a common path.

But disciples cannot remain forever in the ivory tower of academia. The lessons learned must be put into practice. The values and principles adopted and followed. The disciples live their lives in alignment with the values and principles of their master teacher.

And then the disciple, the learner, becomes the apostle, the one sent out. The apostle takes what they have learned, lets it guide their lives, as they reach out to teach others the things

they have learned and to abide by the ideals of what they have learned. Changing the world and those with whom they come into contact. They put into practice what they have learned.

But the apostle does not cease being a learner. The two identities merge together, as the follower of Jesus Christ continues to learn as a disciple do the work of the apostle. As we read and study the gospels we have front row seats to witness exactly what Jesus deemed important for ushering in the reign of God. Compassion, mercy, forgiveness, justice.

As followers of our Lord Jesus Christ we still have much to learn about what it means to be his disciples and what it looks like to carry out his work as his apostles. The work is hard and painful. And it sometimes reveals to us our own complicity within systems that exploit others. But just because the work is difficult, we don't abandon it. And just because we might learn something new that goes against something we believe is true, we don't turn our backs on new teachings.

The work that Jesus calls us to do includes proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, curing that which ails people, casting aside those demons that prey on the weak, and speaking up for those without voice. As I was studying this passage, I came across an article by Jill Duffield, editor of the Presbyterian Outlook magazine. She illustrates just how hard this work can be, saying, "We cannot expect to be about casting out evil without real pushback from demonic forces. We cannot expect to help heal deep, open and life-threatening wounds without putting ourselves in harm's way and going to places where they are perpetually inflicted. We cannot expect to cleanse lepers from a safe distance. We cannot proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ from a sound-proof bunker of personal protection. We cannot raise the dead without spending time in graveyards, morgues and killing fields. We cannot do any of this without a willingness to suffer with those long oppressed."

It is hard work, but it is good work, and it is compassionate. May God give us the endurance to labor in these fields of God's harvest, the courage to stand when we would rather hide, the strength to trod this path of Christ's justice, and the hunger to continue learning all that Christ has to teach.

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