

Called to Responsibility

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Our gospel lesson this morning begins with Jesus going out into the towns and villages, teaching, preaching, and performing healing acts. Whether it be by casting out evil spirits or by healing illness and disease, Jesus in the midst of the people. He's interacting and being the people loving Jesus we know and admire.

As we read on, we come to a point where Jesus is looking out over the crowd. He sees all the people and understands that there are so many who need to know love. He sees into their brokenness and sees they need healing. Then he turns to his disciples and tells them to pray. Jesus tells them to pray to God for workers for the harvest, because the "harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." He tells them to pray the Lord of the harvest will send works into the harvest.

Now, if we stop right there, our reaction might be something like, 'Yeah Jesus! We'll pray for that! We'll pray that the workers will come and we'll pray the harvest will be plentiful and we'll be able to get all that work done. And ya know what? It'll be so good we'll need to build bigger barns (getting into a different parable there) cause all these people will come and want to be nourished and saved and loved.'

That being said, do we really want to continue with the scripture reading? I ask that because if we continue reading, Jesus turns that prayer back on us. Jesus did tell the disciples to pray for workers for the harvest. Then, Jesus sent the disciples themselves out. Jesus turned to the disciples and gave the disciples authority. He gave them authority to cast our evil spirits, authority to cure disease, authority to cure illness of every kind (potent words for current events).

We might see what's happening here in this passage and become anxious. We might read these words and see the precedent Jesus is setting and start to question... 'But, but, but... No, you see, you asked us to do the praying... You didn't ask us to do the going out. You asked us to do the praying... We're getting mixed signals here.'

The precedent Jesus is setting goes back to the words Pope Francis once shared with the people on how we are to pray. He said, "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. This is how prayer works." A similar idea comes to us in another understanding of prayer. It's the idea, prayer does not change God. Prayer changes us. We pray for strength, for nourishment, for hope, for healing. Then we go out and act in ways that bring strength and nourishment and hope and healing.

Continuing on in the scripture, we see the naming of the disciples. All of them are named from Simon, who is called Peter, to Judas Iscariot, who we know later betrays Jesus. Their names are there. This naming is important as it reminds us Jesus... God... Spirit... knows us by name. Jesus-God-Spirit calls us out by name. *We* are the followers of this Word, of God, of scripture, of the truth that can be found in the Bible. We struggle with the words of scripture day in and day out trying to learn what it is God would have us do. We struggle trying to learn how it is God would have us live.

That is what it is to walk in faith, to walk with God, to interpret the Holy Word in a way that is love. Yet, it also means being ready to hear what the Holy Word has for us, even if it Jesus calling us out by name and saying, "Go." We need to be ready to hear Jesus saying, "I give you

authority to cast out evil spirits, to heal disease and illness of every kind. Go... I give you that authority. I call you to that action.”

That promise is powerful. It is hopeful. But it is also frightening, because Jesus is calling us to go and be a voice of love and unity in a time of volatility and division. It can be especially frightening for those of us who have anxiety or who are introverted. I myself am an introvert and suffer from anxiety, the idea of going out a working with people in uncomfortable, possibly dangerous, situations definitely unnerves me. But I still have that call on my heart.

It’s reminiscent of Moses at the burning bush. God speaks to Moses through the burning bush telling him to free the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. God gives Moses a message to take to Pharaoh saying, “Let my people go.” Moses replies to God that he doesn’t speak well, so why would God want to use Moses. Moses was likely hoping that God would then choose someone else to send. Instead, God answered Moses by asking, “Who made tongues?” putting Moses in his place.

Basically, God says to Moses, “Don’t think for a moment I’m not going to give you the ability to do what I’m sending you out to do.” To us God is saying, “Don’t think for a moment, I’m not going to give you the authority to do what I’ve called you to do.”

Still we have trouble believing what God says sometimes. We find ourselves like Sarah, when Abraham is entertaining visitors who have come by their tent; one of whom Abraham recognizes as the Lord. We find ourselves, like Sarah upon hearing she would bare a son in here old age, chuckling in the tent at the idea of God’s ability to do what God has promised.

(Read next paragraph while chuckling)

I mean, what is this thing God says? That I’m given authority? What is this thing that God says God can take care of my being an anxious person? What is this thing God says that God can work with our limited resources? Can God really work through us in times of global pandemic and social up-rise and racism and political divisiveness? What is this thing God says? Surely, I can’t be the person to do that?

When we take that attitude of doubt, God comes back and asks us, “Why did you laugh? Why did you disbelieve? Do you not believe God can do what God says God can do? Do you not believe in the power of God? Do you not believe in God’s wisdom to call you out by name and say, ‘I give you authority?’

God’s speaks to us through Spirit telling us, “I give you authority to reach out into community. I give you authority to make a difference. I give you authority to be the difference. I give you authority to cast out evil in whatever ways it presents itself. I give you authority to be a healing hand against disease and illness; especially when that illness comes in the form of racism, divisiveness, misleading “truth” or misguiding leadership. I give you authority to be the difference.”

We need to be careful though. When God gives us authority, that authority comes with responsibility. We are not just called out by name and given authority. We are called into responsibility. We are ambassadors for Jesus Christ; ambassadors for the love of God, and we have the responsibility to use that authority *with* responsibility.

It's the difference between being a *boss* and being a *leader*. We go into our jobs and there are very different management styles I'm sure all of us have experienced. We can tell the difference between good managers and those managers who are unpleasant pains in our necks. If you go into work and you have a boss, your boss drives, pushes, and demands. Generally, if you have a boss, you are part of a workforce who doesn't like their boss. If you go into work and your manager is a leader, you have a communicator who listens and who inspires. In this situation, you are far more likely to be part of a workforce that is efficient, happy, and get enjoyment from their job. This is because the leader's employees feel appreciated, heard, and valued.

The responsibility we have with the authority we receive from Jesus Christ, to be the difference, has that same dynamic. In order to go out and spread the good news, we can't go out and be "Bible thumping." People don't respond well to chastising voices preaching callously saying, "Well, the Bible says! The Bible says!" To be perfectly honest, the Bible says a lot of things. Not all of them are reflections of God's love. But all of them have a context in which we understand the love of God.

I'll give you an example. The Bible says woman should be silent in church and should not speak on issues of scripture and holiness (1 Corinthians 14:34-35, 1 Timothy 2:11-15). Now, I serve under a female bishop and a female superintendent, I serve with a female district lay leader and our own local lay leader who will all tell you women being silent in church and not being permitted to teach or speak on matters of holiness is hogwash. There are even passages in the Bible contradicting the idea women must be silent in church. Paul used women in leadership and teaching roles in the church. By Paul's own admission, Phoebe was a deacon of the church of Cenchreae (Romans 16:1-2). Lydia led her entire household to be baptized (Acts 16:11-15). Euodia and Syntyche were women evangelists (Philippians 4:2-3). Priscilla, with her husband, was an early church missionary (Romans 16:3). Deborah was a Judge of Israel, a prophetess (Judges 4). Anna was a prophetess when infant Jesus was presented at the temple (Luke 2:36-38). Mother Mary gave us the Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55. The book of Ruth is entirely about the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. The book of Esther is about a woman who saved her people from slaughter. So, there is no shortage of women speaking on matters of holiness, even in the Bible.

We have the authority from God, but we must use it responsibly. One of the ways we are called to responsibility in the authority God gives us is making sure we interpret scripture with love, not prejudice. We certainly need to be responsible enough to not interpret God's love in hate-filled ways.

How can we use that authority today? Today we have pandemic. Today we have social uprising due to racism and abuse of power. Today we have rampant, unhealthy political division and polarization.

So, how do we use authority? We have voice. We can speak out. We can share truth. We can testify to love.

In terms of social unrest, before we step out, we have to responsibly do our research. We have to learn how to be an ally, and an effective ally at that. There's a whole dynamic with racism and social justice we need to be aware of and responsibly navigate. We need to know how to raise our

voice and share our voice in a way that does not do more damage. As the people of God let us learn to be effective allies in this time of social up-rise against racism.

In terms of the pandemic, how can we help out? One of the ways is by going online and researching how we can offer our aid in simple ways. Personal protective equipment (PPE) is desperately needed in hospitals. Medical professionals are having to use garbage bags as PPE. They're having to repeatedly reuse, one-time-use disposable masks. We can look up ways to donate PPE to our hospitals and medical professionals.

In terms of the political divisiveness, what can we do? One word. Vote. Responsibly research your candidates. Fact check your information. Know truth. Look the information up and read it for yourselves. Then vote. Vote for truth. Vote for peace. Vote for unity.

We are given authority to make the world a better place. We have the responsibility to use that authority responsibly. In this way, in addition to our personal witness, we can show love, build hope, garner peace. We can be filled with the Holy Spirit to act and to live with such authority that can bring us peace; not just in our hearts, but also in our communities. It's that love that carries us forward into that transformation that we all hope for, that we are a part of.

May Jesus lead us in such ways. May God guide us in such wisdom. May Spirit fill us and convince us, in holy ways, of such authority. May we use that authority responsibly.

In Jesus' holy name, Amen.