

The Kingdom Comes Home First

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: June 18, 2023

Readings

Exodus 19.1-8

Psalm 100

Romans 5.1-11

Matthew 9.35-10.14

Opening

It was a month ago, to the exact day, when we gathered to celebrate the ascension of our Lord Jesus. On that occasion, we heard our Lord's parting words to the apostles in Acts 1.8, 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.' One month later, we enter Ordinary Time and return to the Gospels in the middle of Jesus' ministry. We have a similar scene with a few notable differences. Christ gathers his apostles, he invests them with his authority and power, he sends them in his name. But the direction, the scope, of that commission is much more constrained in Matthew 9 & 10 than it will be at Jesus' ascension. At the Ascension, Jesus sends his apostles to be witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samara, and to the end of the earth.' Note the strong contrast with the first commission they were given by the Lord: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but *go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*'¹

I have heard this Gospel passage read numerous times, especially at ordination services, including my own. Most often when we interpret this reading, we focus on the commission itself, the call to simplicity, the missional 'tactics', as it were. We focus on that 'what' and 'who' of missionary activity—the twelve disciples, the work of healing, exorcism, and preaching—yet for this mission, the 'where' has a profound meaning for the mission, too. 'You are to go here, but not there...not yet.' Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel; go *nowhere* among Gentile or Samaritan territories. Why? That's the question I want to ponder this morning, for some important reasons.

¹ Matthew 10.5-6

Over the years, I've tried to emphasize themes and readings in the Gospels that specifically focus on the apostles, for the express purpose that we named this parish Apostles Anglican Church. In a few months' time, we'll celebrate 17 years as a parish and if you ask the founding families and individuals about the formation of our church, they will tell you that naming this church 'Apostles' was a) the outcome of a very focused prayer effort and b) was confirmed through unusual happenings, through spiritual signs, in which God made his will quite obvious that we be named Apostles Anglican Church.

Names matter, especially when they are surrendered to God in prayer and he answers prayer. We named our daughter, Madeleine, after Mary Magdalene, and our son, Colin's middle name is Joseph, after the patriarch in Genesis. Throughout their childhood, we've emphasized these passages when we read Scripture so that they find deep roots and purpose in the heritage of their respective names.

I pray we will always have that consciousness when we read about the apostles or what it means to be an apostle. Even before our parish was named Apostles, when we had the provisional name Knoxville Anglican Fellowship, we had a deep sense that we were not only called to plant an Anglican parish, but to plant a missional Anglican parish. That was true in year one and it remains a primary 17 years later. Apostles is a church called to equip evangelists for our time, for *thiscity*, this place we call home, Knoxville.

Mission of Healing and Belief

Let's bring that back to the twelve apostles and their first mission in Matthew 10. The literal meaning of 'apostle' is 'one who is sent.' Apostles do not represent themselves and their personal interests; they represent the will and the purpose of the One who sent them. Apostles do not present their own name, authority, or credentials; any authority they have comes through the Name of the Lord who sent them. Apostles do not labor for themselves or proclaim their own message or agenda; they do the works they are commissioned to do and proclaim the message they have *received*.

We'll return to this restricted scope of Jesus' first commission again in a moment, but to find meaning in that purpose, we'll need to consider what apostolic work they are commissioned to do. Essentially, Jesus commands his apostles to do the work of healing *and* proclaim the Gospel. It is not one or the other, but two expressions of Jesus' Gospel mission that are inextricably linked with one another.

It's interesting that in the Israel of Jesus' day, there were other healers and exorcists; other charismatic preachers with a following. Signs and mighty works could be explained in any number of ways, attributed to the power of any number of gods. Jesus modeled a ministry where healing represented something greater than the restoration of health; healing needed the proclamation of the Gospel in the same moment when a sick person was made well, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.'

Healing is not only a restoration of one's faculties; it calls for repentance, faith, and radical commitment to Jesus of Nazareth. As Lesslie Newbigin said

Healings by themselves, uninterpreted, do not make a demand...Healings, even the most wonderful, do not call this present world radically into question; the gospel does, and this had to be made explicit.²

² *Lesslie Newbigin, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 132.*

That's the kind of mission the apostles were given. Jesus' Gospel mission unites the work of healing and the Word of truth.

That's the 'what' of the apostles' mission—*what* they were sent to do. Now, let's return to that interesting matter of *where* they are sent. For within the 'where' is a crucial 'how'—how our Lord Jesus heals the world's brokenness.

The How Within the Where

Jesus delivers these instructions around his home region of Galilee. He's been visiting the towns and villages of his home region, preaching in synagogues, healing, and raising the dead. If you were to read earlier in Matthew 8-9, you would find that Jesus' assignment to the apostles are the very works Christ himself had been doing.

Jesus then speaks about the tremendous opportunity for ministry: 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'³ Sounds like it's time to scale this effort in an exponential way; now is the time to think big. He commissions the twelve disciples to be his apostles. And in the next moment, he pulls in the reins: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles; don't visit Samaritan towns, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'

To American ears, this sounds like a contradiction. Didn't you just tell us the need was immense? This is the time to go for it! Didn't you tell us to *pray* for a wave of more apostles because the fields are white for harvest? And now you tell us these places are off limits?

Jesus' missional method—*how* he means to redeem the world—is so very different to our way of thinking. It sounds alien to our ears, but it's not alien to Scripture. In fact, if you look at the *whole* story of Scripture, you'll find that Jesus' missional methods mirror God's unusual ways of redemption from the beginning.

When God decides to act in his world, he often does *not* begin with the whole world. He begins with his people, even when his people are so small as one family. When sin and death went viral through the nations, he chose Noah and his family to enter the ark; after the age of Noah, he called Abraham and Sarah to journey to Canaan. When God intervenes to save his world, he doesn't go global first. God does not reveal his wisdom and his ways to all nations, but to Israel first, called to be a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'⁴ He *does* intend to save the whole world—all people of all nations—but he does so by working from the inside-out. God dwells inside Israel so that through *that* relationship they would be a light for the nations.

This pattern working from the inside-out continues in the New Testament. *What God desires to do for the whole world must begin within his people, his church, first.* That is why Jesus spent much more time with the twelve disciples than the crowds. Jesus' earthly mission was not the same as the Apostle Paul's—to take missionary journeys around the Mediterranean. Jesus never travels outside the boundaries of Israel himself. Why? Because his mission was to establish the kingdom of God at home, among his church, first. Yes, he sends his church beyond Jerusalem and Judea into Samaria and even

³ Matthew 9.37

⁴ Exodus 19.6

the ends of the earth. The restriction of the apostles mission in Matthew 10 was temporary, not permanent. But the mission begins at home first. The *where* is the *how*.

In the Epistles, Jesus' apostles uphold the Lord's Kingdom logic, that God's actions for the whole world begin with his church. Think about the doctrine of judgment. We believe that our Lord Jesus will return to judge the whole world. But the Apostle Peter announces to the church, 'it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God.'⁵ Think of St Paul and his call to love. St Paul commands the Galatians, 'let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.'⁶ Jesus' mission is most certainly global, but the mission always begins within his church—to those who bear his own Name.

This is the *whereof* Jesus' mission—he goes to his covenant people first. It was clearly evident in the apostles mission in Matthew 10, but I don't believe that missional tactic has ceased. Even though we live on the other side Jesus' ascension, after he sent his apostles to the ends of the earth, I find a Kingdom logic that still endures: Jesus has a priority for his lost sheep; not simply those who have *never* known him, but for those who have known him and lost their way. He sends his apostles to heal his church first. It may not be how you and I would save the world, but it happens to be the way of the Lord. And that way has deeper wisdom than it might seem.

⁵ 1 Peter 4.11

⁶ Galatians 6.10

My great-grandfather was a country doctor in Roane County who made house calls, traveling by horseback. Thankfully he was able to live a long and healthy life, but consider what it would mean for a rural county and all their surrounding towns if a doctor like himself contracted a serious illness in the middle of his life; if he were the only physician available for everyone else. The doctor's personal health is not a personal matter alone, as if it only affected himself and his family. No, his health has a direct impact on the health of the whole county. If he's too unwell to serve, other conditions in surrounding towns will go undiagnosed or untreated; contagious illnesses spread more rapidly. In that situation, the priority becomes clear: get the doctor well so that he can care for others and stabilize community health on the whole.

Section 3

This is how God means to save the world. God called his people to be a kingdom of priests and a light for the nations. But when, in the words of NT Wright, the solution becomes the problem, God does not abandon his people, they become the priority of his redemption mission. He searches for the lost, for those who have known him and lost their way. He does not give up on his own. He will pursue them with his Gospel until their last breath.

And let us embrace this truth for our sons and daughters have been baptized in the Name of our triune God, who have wandered from the faith. We believe the grace of the Holy Spirit, given in baptism, is still active, still calling them to come home; that this grace will pursue them to their last breath. Even still, we also believe that all lost sheep who belong to the Lord must welcome the Lord and his truth again, just as the towns and villages of Galilee had to open the door and welcome his apostles. Returning to the Lord will bring healing on its wings. And yet healing in Lord's kingdom also requires repentance. Repentance sounds offensive to modern ears, but that's not our personal agenda, it's Jesus' message. We're apostles—we don't declare our own message, but only the message we've been given.

We must embrace the same missional way modeled by her Lord: mission comes to the house of God first. This is why we have added this intercession every Sunday:

*Let us pray for all those who do not follow Christ, those who have not believed, **and those who have abandoned their faith**; that the Holy Spirit may enlighten them through the Gospel and bring them into the way of salvation.*

Pursuing our loved ones who have wandered from the faith of Christ is not a matter of finding the best argument; of adjusting the Christian faith so that it's more appealing or palatable to modern sensibilities. No, we embrace and proclaim the Gospel, upholding the integrity given to us in the teaching of the apostles. That Gospel alone, in all of its fullness, is still mighty to save.

Just as the priority for Gospel proclamation begins within the household of God, we also pray for God's healing work within his church. Christians seek healing, not simply because we desire relief from pain. Christ heals us, not only to bring us *personal wholeness*, but also that we may be *instruments of healing for the world*.

Time forbids me to speak broadly on the subject of healing. A few important thoughts on this matter: we believe God still heals, so we pray earnestly for healing in body, mind, and soul in any broken situation. We will witness God's signs of healing in this life and we have done so these 17 years we've

been a parish. We've seen that happen in our Wednesday service for healing; we've encountered healing stories from prayer ministers and our intercessory prayer team. We pray for healing in faith and trust, believing God is mighty to save.

Yet, we know that even in the Gospels there is a mystery of healing and suffering. We won't comprehend that mystery this side of the New Jerusalem. The same Jesus who healed all manner of diseases in Galilee is the same Jesus who endured suffering unto death on a cross; who did not call upon angels to save him, but instead trusted in his Father to bring resurrection, which is the ultimate and final healing. We must surrender all of our prayers for healing with the same spirit our Lord Jesus prayed in Gethsamene, 'Not my will, but yours be done, O Lord.' In 17 years, we've also witnessed many instances where our prayers for healing will be answered only by the resurrection to come—when the dead in Christ are raised in bodies that will never die again.

Conclusion

Even when God does answer our prayers for significant healing in this life—whether that healing be physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual—there is a sense that total healing awaits us. Even when God brings transformation in body, mind, and spirit, we are still 'wounded healers' as Henri Nouwen said. *Total healing in this life is not the Gospel we preach. Total healing isn't required to be an apostle. When God heals, it's a sign that the kingdom of heaven has come near, that eternity has broken into time, has come to earth in Jesus Christ and through his apostles, through his church.*

When God heals his people, it's a sign that that healing which he's begun is only partial; that there is more. Signs and wonders are not for spectacle. Our healing has a greater meaning than freedom from pain. *Healing in this life is a signpost that there is yet a complete and permanent healing that awaits us.* That is why healing begins first in the Church. Because healing always needs the Gospel word to explain what healing is *for*, what world we were made for.

What begins in the Church isn't meant to stay in the Church. We are healed to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We are sent as apostles. The Lord sent his apostles into the world so that every nation, every square inch of this wounded world would be covered with his grace; to heal all that is broken; to bind up every wound. Eternity, and healing, and the kingdom have broken through, but they have not yet become permanent. There is yet time. So let us live into our name. Let us be apostles. Let us seek *our* lost sheep; let us continue the work of healing; let us proclaim the Gospel and call people to repentance. Let us live, both in word and deed, the Gospel message, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.