

Sermon – “Sheep, Wolves, Serpents, and Doves”

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Scripture Readings: Matthew 9:35-10:23

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Today’s scripture comes from a point at which Jesus has been traveling around for some time healing people and teaching. Seeing and naming a wider need, he commissions his twelve disciples to go out by themselves for a time and do the same. Look now for God’s word in Matthew, chapter 9 verse 35 through chapter 10 verse 23.

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 Cananaean, 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. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town.

"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

Division between people is a concept I suspect you do not find alien just now. Being hated for what you have to say, inspiring anger and fury...the notion of such things can hardly be considered outlandish in these times, unless you have found a comfortable place very far from the daily news. When we read in these long-ago words from Jesus, then, of discord that goes to extremes, of people having to choose in ways that put them on one side or another of a vast gulf, it does not probably seem so far from home.

What is interesting here, in this passage we have just heard that concludes with all this talk of persecution and division, is that the whole thing is built on the starting point of sending people out on a mission of love and compassion. This began with Jesus going about all the towns, proclaiming good news and curing the people. “When he saw the crowds,” we are told, “he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”¹ It is this which prompts him to call for laborers to go out into the fields, sending his twelve disciples out among those people in whom he saw so much need. He gives them power over disease and even death, and a message of hope, and tells them to go forth and spread this miraculous and Godly care among the entire nation of Israel.

But Jesus knows of the strange truth among human beings that messages of compassion are often snubbed, and preaching of a love deep enough to transform is often found scary and meets refusal, even violence; and so he lets them know what to expect: There will be wolves.

What might be surprising, then, is what he arms them with when he sends them on this mission: nothing. Far from giving them swords to protect themselves, he instructs them not even to take things to cover their basic needs. “Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff.”² They are given miraculous power, but no powers of human combat or self-defense, only powers of healing. They are told they will be received well in some places, poorly and even violently in others, but they are to be armed only with the knowledge that this will happen and with trust in God’s providence. It is a rather unusual approach. Quite insane, really, unless the thing Jesus has them doing really does matter more than anything the people they encounter can do to them.

There is a famous scene in the movie *The Empire Strikes Back*,³ in which the young and brash hero, Luke, is under the tutelage of a much older, wiser master, as he seeks to become a powerful force for justice in the galaxy. There is a point in his training where he must go into a mystical cave where he is not sure what he will face, but he senses something fearful. He is told by the master that he should leave behind his weapon, for he will find in there only what he brings with him. Luke ignores this advice, feeling safer armed, and enters only to encounter his greatest enemy, whom in terror he proceeds to attack and kill...only to see the visage of the now-dead evil figure turn into his own face. He learns something there, about how his own self-protective aggression can be the very thing which destroys him, not in body only, either—it can reduce to nothing the difference between himself and the evil he was there to face, which is even worse.

¹ Matthew 9:36 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² Matthew 10:9 (*NRSV*).

³ *Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), Lucasfilm, directed by Irvin Kershner.

Jesus's commissioning of these twelve disciples, of which we only heard the beginning—sort of pep talk for steadfastness that goes on for another half a chapter—speaks of the trust they must have in the legitimacy of the kingdom of heaven, the faith they must have in the worth of the work they do, and the conviction they must have of an ultimate and higher safety found in the power of God. “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul,”⁴ Jesus tells them a few verses later.

The charge they get, then, in the face of opposition, is one different than we might expect. This is to be no band of aggressive missionaries, preaching with threats and disdain, conquering the whole countryside. They are healers sent into the world unarmed except with the words of God's nearness. They are told to share peace, to heal, and to proclaim good news. The good news is the kingdom of heaven, and we know what that means: true justice and abundant life.

But the kingdoms of men are never too pleased when another kingdom threatens to supplant them, and so resistance is guaranteed. I think we in the modern world, which also gives much of its authority to the unjust and the corrupt, can find something of value in, and take heart and vigor from, what is told to these twelve.

First, they are told to go. There is work to be done, and laborers are needed. They are given a specific field to work in, the one that they know themselves: the house of Israel. Others are given other fields, and some of these will move on elsewhere later,⁵ but right now they are to speak the truths that need speaking, good truths but hard ones, into their own culture first.

Second, they are sent as carriers of grace, mercy, and compassion. They are not told to heal people only when they receive and believe the gospel; blessing others with kindness and care is an inseparable part of the proclamation itself.

Third, they are reminded they are dependent on God. They do not provide their own strength, and they cannot forget this. What they need will be provided, whether food or a word to say at the right time.

Fourth, they are messengers of peace even in the midst of hostility and disapproval, and they are to remain at peace within themselves and without. “As you enter the house, greet it,” Jesus directs them. “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.”⁶

This is a harder instruction than it sounds. How often are you able to engage with someone who refuses to hear a word you say or responds with disdain and still remain at peace within yourself about the whole thing? To let it get to you and drive away your peace is far easier.

⁴ Matthew 10:28a (NRSV).

⁵ The Apostle Paul, in particular (who is not one of these twelve), goes out to the Gentiles, but several of the original twelve are traditionally also believed to have carried the Gospel to assorted foreign lands after the events narrated in the scriptures.

⁶ Matthew 10:12-14 (NRSV).

“But I **MUST** convince them,” we sometimes say to ourselves. And some messages are undoubtably of vast importance—certainly the word of God’s justice, peace, and saving grace that must be spoken into this broken and wrongheaded world is of the utmost consequence. But sometimes, facing opposition, it is really not our great confidence in the truths we speak that drives us onward and will not allow us to let it be; it is often the fact that opposition leaves our confidence subtly shaken, and our unconscious need to keep *ourselves* convinced that undoes our harmony and balance, and leads us to tie ourselves in knots trying in desperation to convince others.

That is not what Jesus seems to want of those he sends out here. He speaks of the day of judgment—but implies it is God’s own judgment, to be left to God, not for them to concern themselves with except to be reassured that it does not depend on them to carry it out. This whole passage is a kind of speech for non-anxious faithfulness. Worry not about providing for your needs. Worry not about making sure the unrepentant get what’s coming to them. Worry not about hostility, nor the bodily dangers you will face, nor about the words you will have to say in defense of yourself.

You have only one job, and your job is to make sure that word that must be spoken is spoken, of truth and justice, of mercy and grace, that the nearness of God and the heavenly kingdom so unlike the earthly one in which we live is preached; preached in your speaking of those things aloud even where they will not be heard with joy, preached in your deeds of loving kindness and true compassion even in the midst of hostility all around you, preached in your endurance in this to all the way to the end.

It is to be as sheep amongst the wolves; venturing into hostility without carrying hostility oneself. It is to be the wise serpent, too, not naïve to what can happen; but always as the dove as well, remaining innocent and uncorrupted, and preaching true, never tainting the words by making the messengers of God hard to distinguish from those who oppose them.

Can we do that? Can we walk the roads of our own culture and share in every village the words that need to be heard, into both the places that will heed it and those which will not, with never-failing love for those we meet there, and the ability to remain at peace in ourselves even when rejected, enduring always in faith and humility? There are still wolves. Can we walk among them and yet speak plainly and love openly anyway?

May God allow it to be so. May God grant us freedom from fear, give us knowledge of the kingdom of heaven and wisdom to understand the kingdoms of the earth; may God provide us with compassion, humility, and graciousness toward others; and may the Lord be with us and renew our strength, that we might endure faithfully to the end.