

Pastor's Message – 6/18/23
Matthew 9:35-10:23
Annual Conference Report

I've been out of the pulpit for two Sundays now, once for a Recorder Music workshop and for the Wisconsin Conference United Methodist Annual Conference last week and it is good to be back. Thanks to all who made things work, including Denise Retzlaff, who led worship and preached on the 4th and Edie Illinski, who, along with the Men of Praise, led worship and preached last week.

During the recorder workshop and one of the learning sessions, I had a particular thought. Have you ever heard the expression, or have you ever heard anyone say "things are bad now and getting worse and have never been as bad as they are now? One of our instructors had us singing medieval French motets from the 16th century to practice phrasing and some of the lyrics in those songs told me that things may not be as bad now as they once were. Assuming that Jesus is speaking to us as he was to those original disciples, what is the good news that we are supposed to share? And who are we supposed to share it with?

We have a message to share: a message of good news. Think about all the signals that float through the sanctuary on Sunday morning. If we had a radio with us, we might be able to hear a news report, a baseball game, or some country western music. Or if we had a television set with us, we might pick up the signal for an interview show, a cartoon, or a weather forecast. All those things and more are constantly floating through our sanctuaries. But in order to hear those messages, we need to be able to tune into the right frequencies. Jesus sent the disciples out to declare, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Jesus sent them out to help the people perceive what was taking place in their midst.

Jesus told the disciples, "Go and announce to them that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cure those with leprosy, and cast out demons. Give as freely as you have received!" (Matthew 9:7-8). He couldn't possibly have been speaking to us—only to those first disciples. Is the Kingdom of Heaven near today?

It's appropriate, on this Father's Day, that in our gospel lesson Matthew lists the names of the men who are Jesus' twelve disciples, and we hear Jesus sending them out to spread the good news that the kingdom of God -- the community of God, the close-knit family of God -- had come among them. The kingdom of God was among them, and it is among us too.

With the exception of Judas, the Twelve were incredibly loyal to Jesus, walking an estimated 3,125 miles with him over the course of his ministry. (That's equivalent to walking across America, coast to coast.) Their efforts helped the world to see the coming of the kingdom of God. And for sure, they changed the world.

The gospel reading for today includes Jesus' calling of the Twelve to be apostles, and it gives their names. But the verses that precede that provide important context. They tell us that Jesus was traveling through the villages and cities of Palestine, teaching, preaching, and healing the sick. In doing so, Jesus saw great need — so great and so lasting that he recognized the need for helpers. Jesus described it this way: "The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few." And in the next verse, Jesus calls the Twelve to be among those laborers for the spiritual harvest.

The kingdom of heaven has come near! That is the message that Jesus commands his

disciples to preach as he sends them out to gather the lost sheep of Israel, as recorded in 9:35–10:23. Within the context of this passage, the reader sees God's hand working to prepare the disciples to announce the topsy-turvy presence of the divine kingdom.

In this passage, Matthew describes the Twelve as both disciples and apostles, but it is only here in the entire gospel of Matthew that he identifies the Twelve as “apostles.” We often use the terms disciples and apostles interchangeably, but there’s a difference.

One way to see the difference is to think about your own commitment to follow Jesus. Probably you would not resist being called a disciple of Jesus Christ. That term simply means “somebody who believes in and follows the teachings of a leader,” and when we identify that leader as Jesus, that definition is one description of what it means to be a Christian. The Greek word Matthew uses for “disciple” in this passage means “learner” or “pupil,” and to the extent that we remain open to learning from the life and teachings of Jesus, “discipleship” can be another term for the Christian life.

We all need to think of ourselves as disciples, pupils of Jesus, learners in the faith. Even clergy who may be in full-time or part-time ministry and thus sent out on apostle duty need to remain, humbly, disciples, for there is ever more to learn of Christ and fresh understandings to gain. When we stop being disciples and think that we have nothing more to learn, and stop growing in our faith, we become a drag on the church of Jesus.

How many of us would call ourselves apostles? Whether or not we know the definition of that word, we seldom hear it used as a synonym for the everyday Christian. Somehow, we attach a sense of special-ness to the term, so that we might say that all Christians are disciples of Jesus but not all disciples are apostles. And that’s essentially correct, for Matthew uses an entirely different Greek word when he speaks of apostles. That word means a “delegate,” “ambassador” or “messenger” — one sent out on a specific mission on behalf of another.

When we know that, it begins to make sense why Matthew used “apostle” only in this passage in his gospel. In other places in Matthew’s book, the Twelve are in the supporting cast, men walking with Jesus and learning from him. But in this section, immediately after Matthew identifies the Twelve by name, he tells us that Jesus sent them out with specific instructions to “proclaim the good news ... cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” They were given apostle-work, something that went well beyond discipleship.

Apostleship is not something reserved for special Christians in ordinary times but for ordinary Christians in special times. The biblical passage before tells us that as Jesus made his preaching tour through the communities of Galilee, he saw needs that told him it was a special time. Thus, he called twelve of his disciples to temporary duty as apostles to meet that special need.

They were sent out to preach the gospel, cure the sick, raise the dead and cast out demons. We can certainly argue that the modern equivalents of those things are always needed and thus that they are not “special” needs but ongoing ones. Yet, in reality, most of us do not encounter those needs all the time. There come special moments when the opportunity occurs to help some oppressed person receive justice, to give some despairing person our testimony of faith, to guide some wounded person toward sources of healing. And when such times come, we who are always disciples can hear in those moments Christ’s call to become, at least for a short time, an apostle, sent out to do his work.

The success of God's mission in the world depends on those to whom it has been entrusted. According to the first chapter of Acts, at the time of Jesus' ascension, the entire band of disciples — that is, all of the active followers of Jesus — numbered about 120 (Acts 1:15). That included the Eleven who remained after Judas' betrayal and death, the women who joined Jesus' entourage during his ministry, and other men and women who had been persuaded by his words or moved by his actions to believe.

There were only about 120, but there were 120!

This Congregation is close to that number. We have 98 Professing Members on our records and about another 16 who are active and present in the Church. That makes 114; pretty close to 120. Think about what we could do, think about what we are already doing, as we take seriously our call to be disciples of Jesus and our opportunities to be, in conjunction with our fellow believers, his apostles as well.

I mentioned at the top of this sermon that I've been out of the pulpit for two Sundays. Last weekend I attended our Annual Conference at the KI Convention Center in Green Bay, and this is my opportunity to bring a report to you about that Conference.

No doubt you have heard that there are Churches that are leaving and have left the United Methodist Church. Through a process developed at the General Conference of 2019 and adapted for Wisconsin, 43 Churches of the Wisconsin Conference requested, fulfilled the requirements, and disaffiliated from the United Methodist Church in Wisconsin at this past weekend's Annual Conference. There may be other Churches who wish to disaffiliate, but the deadline has passed for this year and there may be other processes which come out of the General Conference next year.

The Annual Conference passed a disaffiliation resolution and grieves the loss of brothers and sisters who have left the United Methodist Church for a different faith expression, but, at the same time, it gives our new Wisconsin Conference an opportunity to revisit and review our particular mission and call from God. How are we now to see ourselves as disciples and apostles and United Methodists in Wisconsin?

We also passed resolutions for the discontinuance of 5 United Methodist Churches: Madison, Bashford; Madison, Wellspring; Wittenberg, New Horizons; Beetown; and Milwaukee, Summerfield, who have come to a point where they can no longer sustain themselves as a Church.

You might be thinking, "things have never been as bad and are getting worse," but, in the midst of disaffiliations and discontinuances, new Congregations are forming and the good news of the Kingdom of God among us is still being shared, the hungry are being fed, the homeless are being sheltered, children are cared for and those in need are being served. This Waupun United Methodist Church was faithful again in paying 100% of our apportionments and I took 4 sewing machines with me to Annual Conference which will be sent to Bolivia for cottage industries.

It was in what is called the "consent agenda" a resolution was passed that each Church would have a Sunday dedicated to youth ministry, to United Women of Faith, camping ministries and renewed our covenant to be in ministry with Harbor House of Superior, Northcott Neighborhood House of Milwaukee and United Methodist Childrens' Services. New Conference and District leaders were affirmed, and we passed resolutions to care for retired clergy and their spouses. I mentioned that the United Methodist Church will hold a General

Conference next year, so delegates were elected to represent us at both the Jurisdictional Conference and the General Conference.

The President of Garret-Evangelical Theological Seminary led an excellent Bible Study based on the story of Jacob from the Book of Genesis. You may remember that Jacob emerged from the womb grasping the heel of his brother Esau and, through his life, never stopped grasping for every advantage for himself. Even when he had the opportunity, much later in life, to make amends with his brother, he remained true to form, and acted in his own best interests.

Dr. Viera talked about how each of us wrestle with God, just as Jacob did, and the struggle we all might have at one time or another to wrestle to a draw and not surrender in obedience to God. We have the opportunity, as Jesus commands, to reach out for the betterment of others and for the world to share the story of God's love—to tell the story of what is good and what can be better as a disciple.

This month you have the opportunity to pray about, reflect on, and vote on what could be a new mission statement for the Church. This vote, a new mission statement, should result in a change for the better. It is an opportunity to create a ministry for the church: something meaningful, something profound, something real, something with depth and substance. Not just words, but a direction for the future. It is an opportunity for the church and for those within the church to be on a journey of faith and to plant and water seeds that will bloom and produce fruit for years to come. Dr. Viera called disciples of Jesus “prophets of a future not our own.”

In verse 5 and 6 of our Bible reading today, “Jesus sent out the twelve apostles with these instructions: “Don't go to the Gentiles or the Samaritans, but only to the people of Israel—God's lost sheep.” Later on, in chapter 28, Jesus will say, “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” Tell the good news, that the kingdom of God has come near.

As we go to the world, the world also comes to us. All around us are people from different cultures and different backgrounds. Just as we live out our call to be apostles and share the good news, so we can also live out our call to be disciples and learn and hear the good news from them. Our Learning Day on Monday focused on the idea that we all plant, live in, and benefit from our own gardens. As we share the fruits of our gardens with others, we also benefit from the fruits of theirs.

We are not a Church of sameness anymore. In our Wisconsin Conference, we have Congregations that are still mostly white, but we also have African churches, Hmong churches, Hispanic churches, Native American churches, and Korean churches. There are many flowers and fruits in our garden. There are White pastors, African pastors, Hmong pastors, Hispanic pastors, Korean pastors, and Filipino pastors. The Wisconsin Conference of the United Methodist Church is one of diversity and welcomes and benefits from the gifts and graces of many people and we are better for it.

Go out to all the world. Tell the good news that the Kingdom of God has come near. Jesus calls us to be both disciples and apostles. We go to the world and the world comes to us. We are disciples and we are apostles, called and sent to share the good news that the kingdom of God is among us.