**Sermon on Matthew 9:35—10:23**

**Sunday, June 18, 2023**

**3rd Sunday after Pentecost**

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These words are not easy to hear. Jesus does not sugar coat anything here. Instead, Jesus reveals the full reality of the cost of being a disciple. These words are challenging and require us to do some self-examination about the ways we are following Jesus. These words even caused me to ask myself if it is really worth it to follow Jesus if this is the reality I will face.

The lectionary made verses 9-23 optional in this week’s reading. I don’t know for sure why they made these verses optional, but it would certainly be more comfortable and reassuring to not have to hear these difficult words from Jesus. However, I thought it was important for us to hear these words. To a certain extent I think that you already know the truth of these words. Perhaps you have experienced persecution or the strain on family relationships because of being a disciple. As much as we wish that being a Christian would provide us with protection from all the bad things in the world, the reality is actually the opposite. Being a follower of Jesus complicates life and even brings trying circumstances into our lives. This is difficult news to absorb.

I don’t know that the world was ever really supportive of Christians. The world certainly wasn’t supportive when Jesus was talking with his apostles, and it isn’t supportive now.

A couple of weeks ago, a reporter from the Livingston Enterprise, the local newspaper in Livingston, reached out to me and a few other pastors in town to comment for an article he was working on. The article reported some of the statistics of the growing and intensifying epidemic of isolation and loneliness. I and the other pastors shared about the isolation and loneliness that we have seen in our work as pastors in Park County. We also shared about the role that faith and a Christian community can have in preventing people from feeling lonely or isolated as well as provide healing after experiencing isolation. The article was the main story on the front page of edition it came out in. It was some really good coverage of an important issue facing many people in our community and across the country. Additionally, the article presented a partial solution to the problem in and through the sense of belonging and inclusion that churches can offer.

However, I heard that the editor of the Enterprise received some significant criticism after the article was published. One subscriber was incensed and insisted that religion should be left out of the paper and especially off the front page. This is a minor example of what Jesus talked about in these verses. I want to be clear that this is not even in the same realm as the persecution some Christians have faced in past centuries and in parts of the world today. It is nevertheless evidence that doing the work Jesus called us to do is not popular and will bring hardship.

Jesus said, “You will be hated by all because of my name” and “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves.” As Christians we will not be accepted by everyone or even anyone. Being a disciple will not be comfortable. In fact, it will disrupt your life.

Jesus named the reality that being a disciple is both costly and demanding. And he also named the reality of what makes it possible for us to endure and even embrace this reality. The other reality that Jesus named in these verses is that we don’t do this work alone. Even while this passage is full of specifics about the harsh realities about being a follower of Jesus, it is also full of the promises and good news about being a follower of Jesus.

Our God is a compassionate God. Jesus saw the people in the crowds and had compassion for them. Jesus sees you and me and has compassion for us. God sees all the people in the world and all of creation and has compassion. Jesus remains with us like a shepherd offering protection and all we need to thrive. The harvest is plentiful. Even though it is going to be difficult to bring in the harvest with the few workers we have, it is so encouraging to know that there are so many people out there who are indeed receptive to hearing about and experiencing God’s grace.

As disciples of Jesus, we have received without payment. We have received God’s abundant grace and have been transformed by it. It is because we have freely received this gift that we are equipped and empowered to also bring this gift to others so that they too can experience this transformation. Jesus reassured his disciples that when they end up in difficult situations, “what you are to say will be given to you at that time.” (10:19) We don’t have to figure out the right or perfect words. It is a relief to know that the Spirit will speak through us. And the best news of all is the kingdom of heaven has come near. Jesus has come, the Spirit remains with us, and God is transforming everything and everyone.

When you have experienced first hand all this good news that Jesus has shared, when you have experienced the liberation of the coming of the kingdom of heaven, you can expect challenges and hardship to come along with the transformation.

So what are we to do when the hardships and resistance arise due to being a follower of Jesus? Let’s go back to that negative feedback about the Enterprise article I was quoted in. When I first heard about the criticism, I wondered if I had said something wrong. I questioned if I should have been so candid and upfront about my faith and what happens when one is a Christian.

I put myself out there as being a Christian in a world where being religious is becoming less and less common and accepted. I was vulnerable about the loneliness and isolation I have felt myself since moving to Livingston a year and a half ago. I was also vulnerable in the ways I revealed the emotional, social, and spiritual transformation that can happen through a Christian community. The risk I took in being publicly vulnerable exposed me like a sheep being sent out into the midst of wolves. I nearly regrated the comments I provided for the article, fearful of the conflict that might come my way.

After reflecting for a while, I came to the conclusion that it was indeed worth it. I shook off the metaphorical dust from my feet and left. I decided not to waste my time thinking about or trying to persuade that particular subscriber of the Livingston Enterprise who clearly did not want to hear about Jesus. Jesus told his disciples not to linger where they didn’t find welcome or peace. Rather, Jesus instructed his disciples to move on to find people who are curious and to spend time with people who do want to listen and hear about Jesus. There are plenty of these people. The harvest is plentiful.

I believe it was the Spirit that guided the words I shared for the article that upset some but resonated deeply with others. The comments I shared for the article were truths I believed when I shared them and I stand by those comments that revealed the power and transformation that happens because of God’s healing through the Body of Christ. Hope comes and is possible when it is proclaimed to a world that is wounded. That hope will first be rejected by the world, but ultimately the hope of God will prevail. The article offered two realities- the reality that isolation and loneliness are far too common and the reality that being part of the Body of Christ can lead to healing.

Jesus stepped into our messy and broken reality. And we are called to follow suit, to step into the messy reality of the world, to not remain stuck inside these walls where we gather each week but rather to go out, to find ways to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Being a disciple is and will be disruptive and disorienting. And it is worth it.

God has sent us. The harvest is plentiful, and we are the workers that are needed for this harvest. YOU are the workers that are needed for this harvest. God has called you and me to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near. And God will provide all that we need and will remain with us as we bring in the harvest. Thanks be to God. Amen.