

As we said last week, *you can't read the New Testament without reading the Old*. That will be especially evident throughout the Gospel of Matthew. Here in his gospel for the first time, the twelve disciples are named and you may notice they seemed to be paired and if you go to the Gospel of Luke, you will actually read that they *were* sent out two by two—not sent off alone. And that's one point we can make right now—that we do ministry together—not off alone but at the least, two-by-two; understanding that each of us is empowered by God through the Holy Spirit to do everything we do; and then carry it along from there, that God calls us into community—into the church—a faith community and together we carry on the mission—bringing the kingdom of God near.

Now another thing that stands out in this passage is that Jesus specifically sent the disciples to people he described as the *lost sheep of Israel*. Don't go to the Gentiles or the Samaritans, he told them; and that would be anyone other than Jews like themselves—Jews who were bound by their own religious law to worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Go only to the *lost sheep of Israel*, Jesus said. Jesus' mission of bringing God's kingdom near only included his own people at that point—and *for* a point as well—to *make* a point; and that is where knowing the Old Testament has a bearing on this story because Jesus was doing more than giving the twelve disciples a test run. He was sending a very clear message about himself that every Jew who read Matthew's story about Jesus would understand. We'll get to that in just a minute, but first let's notice one more thing about this particular passage.

The passage begins with Jesus—telling what he was doing and how he was feeling about it. What he was doing was preaching and teaching and *healing every disease and infirmity*. His reaction was described as being compassionate *because the people were harassed and helpless—like sheep without a shepherd*. Jesus sent the disciples out to do the same thing he had been doing; sent them to tell the people—the Jews—that God's kingdom was at hand—in other words, right there in their faces—right there meddling in their lives; as they were healed and as they were raised from the dead and as lepers were cleansed and as the tormented were exorcised of their demons. Life was not bound to the sickness and death and torment of this world's failing state. Life was liberated by God; restored and new and whole again; God's kingdom there among them through the empowered mission of Jesus' disciples sent to help them.

So, what's the “hidden” message that Jesus was making—that Matthew was making by presenting Jesus' story in this particular way? By going to Israel's lost sheep; by going as the shepherd with compassion for the sheep; by gathering up the hungry and the sick and the lame and feeding and healing them Jesus was equating his mission with God's own effort to reach out and gather the people. Jesus work among the people and the work he sent those disciples off to accomplish were a direct parallel to the work of God Almighty to the “scattered sheep of Israel” described by the Prophet Ezekiel centuries before.

In Chapter 34 of Ezekiel, God condemned the “shepherds” of Israel who were feeding themselves and not feeding their sheep. Those shepherds were the priests who were supposedly bound to the service of God to take care of God's people. They were taking care of themselves instead, and in the process, abusing the people. As a result, God told them that his own people had been scattered; that they had not gone out and looked for them; that there were “none to search or seek for them.” Those shepherds stood useless and condemned. Therefore, God said this: *thus says the Lord God: Behold,*

*I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out...and I will rescue them; I will gather them...and feed them with good pasture. I will seek the lost and bring back the strayed; bind the lame; strengthen the weak and...I will watch over them.*

Matthew's Jesus, the shepherd, is more than a miracle man from Nazareth. Jesus takes on this mission God proclaimed in the book of Ezekiel. Israel's scattered sheep—those “lost” in Jesus' eyes, were the very people who were overlooked by the temple priests and the Pharisees and the chief priests. They were Jews who spent their days working hard for a living—the living poor, if you will; Jews who did not have the “luxury” of being able to keep the religious laws of the day; shepherds, farmers, fishermen; laborers of all kinds; they were the sick and the lame; impoverished people who did not have the time or the means or the health to be considered “clean” according to age-old, cherished religious law; who were not clean and therefore were not able to worship at the temple; were not welcomed; were not sought out; were not included; were in fact treated as outcasts; and yet they were God's own chosen people—just as chosen as the people who made the rules of inclusion; who kept those rules and who decided who was and who was not “clean” enough—who was “holy” enough according to their own Holy Code of conduct; who was “in” and who was definitely “out!”

Jesus proclaimed his mission to be to those scattered people; those displaced from their relationship with God according to the religious laws barring their access. Jesus went out into the countryside looking for them. Jesus brought God “near” to them by talking to them about God; by healing them; by feeding them; by taking care of them with compassion. He gave his own work to his disciples, and sent them off with the same mission—because, as he said, the harvest is plentiful—in other words, there would be an ever-ready crop of the lost and scattered and lame and hungry; an ever-plentiful crop of the helpless and harassed. At that point in his ministry, Jesus did not look beyond his own circle—his own Jewish cultural circle. By the end of his time on this earth, he commissioned those disciples to go to the ends of the earth—the ready “harvest” was there on a world-wide scale; God's chosen circle with no boundary; a chosen circle full of need.

You cannot be a living, conscious member of society today and not be aware that the “harvest” is still full and ripe and waiting to be gathered. The world may be shrinking but her needs have not diminished by one iota since Christ's day. You cannot be a follower of Christ and not be aware of the desperate state of the world that is ours to reach out to; ours to enter into; ours to cope with; ours to address with compassion and with courage and with sacrifice. You cannot listen to the Word of God and ignore God's call upon you to bring the kingdom near to those in need.

So are we alive with the possibilities that are there—that come our way? Or do we pull up to the pump and fill the tank with a sense of foreboding and helplessness? I don't think we need to be “excited” over the mounting task before us—this ever-burgeoning harvest, but maybe you can see a certain affirmation to your call in life that God does indeed have a task; a purpose for us; that we are not living aimlessly in search of God's mission. And before our sense of helplessness rises with the ever rising costs and complexities of life, let us remember—it *is* God's mission that we are called to—not our own. It is God's mission and God will never be overcome.

*I am with you...you are mine:* those were God's words to Ezekiel and to the scattered sheep; those were Christ's words to his disciples there in that final

commissioning in Matthew; those are Christ's words to us as that commission becomes our own as we follow Christ; as we become the laborers God sends out into this needy world. It is God's mission we have given our lives to. It is God who is with us every step of the way. We will not be overwhelmed. We will not be helpless. We will not be uncertain of the future. It is all in God's hands. Remember, at the least, it is two-by-two we go out each and every day—out to labor in the midst of that ever-ready harvest. It is all in God's hands as we lend our own. Amen.

“Lord of the harvest” Matthew 9:35-10:8 061508 Mkh

We live in a fearful world. Mother nature may be the cause: typhoon in Myanmar; an earthquake in China; or floods and tornadoes here at home. Or then there's our own our miserable nature causing one conflict after another—and I don't mean just “us;” I mean “us” as the human race; we just don't get along with one another; never have. We live in increasingly hard times. Stop at the pump; go to the store; and I don't mean just “us;” it's hard all over the world; especially for the poor as world food costs are pushing them right out of the running. We live in a time that is filled with anxiety. Loss of jobs; rising medical costs in a galloping race with increasing medical needs; contamination of the food chain; loss of quality through outsourcing of products and services. We live in stressful times. Stress in our families; on our children; at work; at school; stress for travelers; for our aging;