

SERMON Pastor Cris Frigm

When we're scheduling events in the life of the congregation, there are a couple of calendar data points we have to consider. We pay attention to the church season. We think about secular holidays and travel schedules. We consider staff member vacations – especially if I'm going to be away.

So, when Linda Grund and I were working with the Membership Committee to schedule the reception of new members for our spring "class," we had to take all these things into account. We had to schedule two learning sessions plus the rite of welcome in worship and we had to fit it in somehow between everything else that was going on in everybody's lives. As it is, we ended up with a day that one of our new members couldn't actually be here. And then another one had a last-minute emergency. We hold Mike and Emily in our prayers as they say goodbye to a beloved pet.

In all those calculations, I **usually** try to check the readings for the day to see what we're going to hear in worship. We didn't have a lot of flexibility in the schedule this year with how Pentecost fell, with the fact that I'm going to camp this week, but we ended up with a rather poignant, extremely relevant Gospel reading in which Jesus very directly addresses not just our new members, but all of us.

Because when we receive new members into this particular family of God in this particular time and place, we are recommitting ourselves to the mission that God gives us. We are acknowledging and affirming our intent to live out our discipleship – together, collectively, and with purpose.

It's not about checking a box to say you're now part of the club, becoming a part of the church is to accept the charge that Jesus gives to those who would follow when he told the disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few..." After advising them that there is much to do and not a lot of people to do it, he promptly sends them out with very specific instructions.

He empowers them, gave them authority over unclean spirits and the ability to cure every disease and every sickness, and then he gives them their marching orders for what it means to work in the harvest field of God.

It bears some specificity that only applied to them. He told them not to go to the gentiles or Samaritans, but only to the lost sheep of Israel. That was certainly a limitation on their mission at that moment in history and in the timeline of God's covenant. Since

Galilee, where they were, was surrounded by gentiles and Samaritans, he was certainly keeping them close to home at that time.

He would go on after our reading from today to provide more specifics – take only the barest of essentials, travel lightly with pretty much the clothes on your back. There's some question as to whether he told them not to take an **extra** staff or not to take a staff at all, which would leave them especially vulnerable to the dangers of the time. He will warn them that they are not going to be safe in their journey, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves..." and it's not entirely clear if this journey will end in success or in persecution and violence.

But the task at hand remains the same. Jesus sends them out to "proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'" Underneath all that is said about the response to that proclamation, is the task itself. Proclaim, cure, cleanse. Freely. Peacefully. In God's name.

You have probably heard me use some caution when talking about the institution that now bears God's name and carries on this mission today. It's not that I don't love the churches that have carried on this mission for millennia. It's not that I don't think the church **can** have a profound impact on the world.

But we've become torn apart and distracted by our inability to stick to the central message of what God was doing when the church began – what God was putting in place as the followers of Jesus became the followers of the way, became the believers of the first and second centuries.

Before there were buildings, before there was Christendom to center Christianity in the power structures of the empires, before we managed to create Christian clubs that focused either on a life to come that had no bearing on the world or on our efforts to control how everybody else thought...

Before all that brokenness, came the mission of the kingdom – came the charge to restore people and communities to wholeness by healing, by casting out evil, by proclaiming peace. It might not seem like it sometimes, but we carry on that same charge today.

When we offer food to those who are hungry, when we offer shelter to those who are unhoused, when we offer unconditional love to the children who walk through our preschool doors no matter their ethnicity or family background, **that's** when we are most

closely following the mission that God has given us. That's when we are proclaiming the kingdom of heaven.

Over the centuries, the church has become really good at taking the image of a harvest in which we are sent to work and re-imagining it as a word of judgment against those who should be swept away as weeds or chaff. We'll hear more about that later this summer.

But it isn't our harvest. We're not sent to judge or choose who is worthy. We're not sent to harvest a select few out of the world because they look like us, or think like us, or because we want them to be part of our club. We're sent by the one who was moved by compassion. The Greek word literally means that Jesus' bowels were moved by what he saw in the brokenness. Gut-wrenching is a pretty good modern equivalent. We are sent out to what makes our gut wrench to share God's love to restore it and make people whole.

We are sent out as a collective of disciples to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near, that God is at work in restoring the world to what it was created to be.

There's nothing wrong with connecting with one another and taking care of one another, because we all need that community. We all need that connection. But there's more to it than that. There's more to God's mission than gathering together here. To be part of the church today, to be part of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Newark, Delaware is to work for the world who needs us; to follow in Jesus' compassionate footsteps. To go from here into the harvest. Together. Amen.