

“The Kingdom of Heaven Has Come Near” by Dr. Katelyn Brackney

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The Harvest Is Great, the Laborers Few

³⁵ 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. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

The Twelve Apostles

10 Then Jesus^[a] summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. ² 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; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus;^[b]⁴ Simon the Cananaean and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

The Mission of the Twelve

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not take a road leading to gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, ⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷ As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’^[c] ⁸ Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

⁹ Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, ¹⁰ no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff, for laborers deserve their food. ¹¹ Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. ¹² As you enter the house, greet it. ¹³ If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

Coming Persecutions

¹⁶ "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. ¹⁷ Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues, ¹⁸ and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the gentiles. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. ²¹ Sibling will betray sibling to death and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, ²² and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ²³ When they persecute you in this town, flee to the next, for truly I tell you, you will not have finished going through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

While the end of this passage takes a bit of a turn...if we pause and back up, both in this specific text, and in the book or overarching story, what may have started off a bit fuzzy or...maybe even off putting, becomes a bit more clear and more inviting.

But before we dig in, I want to just say a few quick words as we begin since this is my first time preaching here.

Whenever I preach, as I prepare, I always look for a few specific things: 1) what does this passage tell me about who God is, 2) what does this passage tell me about who God calls humanity to be, 3) what does this passage tell me about the place and people of the time? (afterall, context matters!), and 4) what is the good news in the text? These questions go hand in hand, and more questions and discoveries happen along the way. But I'm always curious first about who God is, and, as people made in God's image, when we learn more about who God is, we

learn more about who we should be too. And our text today gives us a strong start.

This passage from Matthew jumps in by telling us that Jesus goes out into the cities and villages, teaching the “good news of the kingdom of God” and this good news includes the very embodied and tangible work of healing and restoration. There is no question here that God, as we see in the person of Jesus, is a God of abundance and wholeness—a God who puts in the work, going to different cities and places preaching, teaching, and generally proclaiming this *good news*. And this proclamation includes embodied action, not just talk.

One commentary shares this,

Jesus’s ministry, as described in Matthew 9:35, is holistic. He teaches in synagogues, proclaims the good news of the kingdom, and heals every disease and affliction. His compassion for the people is not abstract; it moves him to action. He sees their suffering, their lostness, and recognizes their need for leadership and care...Depending on our church traditions and the nations we reside in, gospel work that focuses on healing and justice can be suspect, seen as “social justice” disconnected from the proclamation of the good news. Similarly, some ministries focus their work entirely on the teaching and proclamation of the gospel with very little thought toward justice and healing. Jesus shows us that the work of the compassionate shepherd is holistic and integral; the preaching of the gospel is never separated from the embodied work of the gospel to bring healing and wholeness. ([Working Preacher, Danny Z.](#))

That's pretty good news, don't you think? I might be a little biased since I have a particular fondness for the topic of embodied and holistic care as I did my Doctor of Ministry project on embodied spiritual formation and the importance of including our bodies, not just our minds or hearts, in our lives of faith. But even without that background, I still think this holistic approach to Jesus's ministry is *good news*. And the good news continues!...

Not too long after this statement of the work Jesus did, there is an invitation from Jesus to his disciples, and that invitation mirrors exactly what Jesus has done. Jesus calls his disciples, gives them authority to be agents of healing, change, and compassion, and sends them on their way saying, "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'the kingdom of heaven has come near. Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease (or leprosy); cast out demons. [You received freely, so give freely, too.]"

We see another sort of "great commission" here.

There are a few things here that I think are important for us to notice: First, that Jesus gives instructions for their journey (including some kind of wild ones about not taking a bag or money, etc.), but the piece here that sticks out to me is that the disciples, again, are called to action. They aren't just listening to what Jesus is saying, nor are they simply repeating it out in public, they are living it. One commentary says, "Instructions only take us so far. The faithful church must move beyond Jesus himself, as the disciples do...the point is simple, our search for instructions often detracts from the main thing. Where the realm of heaven is breaking out, we find healing and liberation. This is what we need to know." ([Working Preacher, Greg Carry](#))

They hear the call, and answer by joining in the work Jesus has been up to, and that God has always been up to. And we are invited to do the same.

Remember a moment ago as we zoomed back, let's do that just a little more...In this section of Matthew there are three groups of stories about people who are sick, broken, or in danger. Jesus heals or saves all of them through acts of power. In the midst of these we see two parallel stories about Jesus' radical call to follow him. This is one of them, and this call displays that the kingdom of God that the disciples are invited to proclaim, and that Jesus has proclaimed, is coming near through this restorative work. "This is not just about physical healing, but also about restoring people to wholeness—socially, spiritually, and physically. Jesus's commissioning of the Twelve..[shows us] that faith [is] active participation in God's...mission. The work of healing, restoration, and justice is not confined to Jesus alone; it is entrusted to his followers [too]." ([Working Preacher, Danny Z.](#))

I think sometimes when we hear about this restoring/healing work in the New Testament we can get stuck on how miraculous it all sounds and it can be hard to ground it in our modern context. But if we look at the stories of Jesus throughout the New Testament, even just the list we've read in our passage today, and we think about what that might look like today I think we can get a pretty good idea of the kind of work we are being invited to join.

I found the examples that Anna Case-Winters gives in her commentary on Matthew to be helpful. She describes it as attentiveness to suffering. She shares that it is in attentiveness to suffering that we discover our mission, and if we attend to the suffering of others in our day and time it will reconnect us with the original charge to the disciples. She goes on to give examples saying,

- "The charge to cure the sick may include all kinds of healing—addressing the full range of things that hurt or diminish lives"

- “Raising the dead could include challenging the death-dealing systems and structures and things that crush people and suck the life out of them”
- “Cleansing lepers would surely include not only physical healing but also the social restoration of those who are outcast, the “untouchables” of our own time and place”
- “To cast our demons expands to include setting people free from whatever holds them in bondage—everything from addiction to [systemic] oppression”

She says, “to be disciples today is to get mixed up in the mission of Jesus as people summoned and sent to teach what [Jesus] taught and do what he did.”

(Belief Commentary, p.149)

I love that phrase “getting mixed up in the mission of Jesus.”

While I am just starting to get to know you and this church, it seems to me that there are some places where this kind of good work, or “getting mixed up in the mission of Jesus,” or “where the kingdom of heaven has come near,” is already happening, and it seems that we are also in a time of discovery. As we consider how we might join in this restoring work, and what is our work to do, I pray that we be open to the “more” that God has and is calling us to.

We are all called in different ways and in different times. As the rest of the passage shares, it certainly doesn’t always go as planned, nor does it go without pain. Sometimes we have to shake the dust off our feet and move forward sooner than planned, sometimes we experience hurt or ridicule, but the thing that stays true is the thing that we can recall when things get fuzzy again, or when they feel “off.” The thing that stays true is that God is one who continually extends peace, even if it is not received, and we are invited to do the same. God is one who desires wholeness, who desires for us, our communities, our world, and all of

creation to be restored, and we get to join in that good work by “getting mixed up” in the mission of God.

May we embody this good news in our daily lives, looking for places that are broken and need healing, for invitations to join in God’s good work, and proclaim with the Christ, the disciples, all who have gone before us, and who walk alongside us, that the kingdom of God has come near.

Amen.