

Pentecost 4/Proper 7A

June 25, 2023

The Church of Saint Mary the Virgin

**Propers: Jeremiah 20:7–13; Psalm 69:7–10, 16, 18; Romans 5:15b–19;
Matthew 10:16–33**

by the Reverend James Ross Smith

Jesus of Nazareth is the son of a village artisan and his spouse, righteous, just, and observant folk, willing to oppose evil and to do what is right. Mary and Joseph hear and do God’s will at some risk to their own lives and reputations, but they are not without wills of their own. Jesus’ words this morning describe them well, “wise as serpents”— they know wickedness when they see it—“and innocent as doves”—pure of heart, attentive to the presence of God.

Joseph and Mary are neither famous nor prominent, though King David is a royal ancestor. These are Jesus’ parents, of course, though the deeper truth of his parentage is a bit more complicated. *We* know the story, though their neighbors do not. And it is from this rich soil that Jesus emerges; and that verb feels right—to emerge, to come forth, to rise, to appear—like a blossom, or a sunrise, like some dim light that grows brighter and brighter as it draws near. Jesus emerges from obscurity, he walks out of the desert, tested but victorious, and begins a ministry that seems exactly like what we heard described in the gospel last week and again this morning: he invites people to join him, and this small band of improbable disciples becomes the nucleus of a Jesus community; he is peripatetic, he goes from city to village to countryside and back again; he sits on a rise and teaches hundreds of people; he goes off by himself to pray; he knows the writings and traditions of his people; and he shares his knowledge and understanding with both the learned and the uneducated; he *heals*; he comes to the aid of those whose lives have been broken by what looks to us like mental illness; and, most important, he proclaims the good news that God *is*, that God is alive and present, breaking into the world, coming to us in unpredictable ways: Jesus says, “As you go,

proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 10:7). And Saint Matthew tells us that one of the signs of the kingdom’s advent is compassion: “When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36) This is a deeply human emotion. Jesus, prophet, teacher, brother, looks at his people, and he loves them. But it is something else, too, isn’t it? Jesus’ compassion is the compassion of God. In Jesus *himself*, the kingdom of God comes near.

The tenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew is known as the “Mission Discourse.” On the three successive Sundays that began last week we hear Jesus talking to his disciples about mission, about sending, and the one who is sent, about the life of the disciple, and about the sometimes terrible cost of discipleship. And the heart of Jesus’ teaching is the kingdom, the presence, and the power of God. Everything that Christians have done in the name of “*mission*” in the days, years, and centuries after Pentecost—the good, the bad, and the ugly—could be judged by this teaching. And the teaching is rich and complex: first of all, chapter 10 is about Jesus and his little band of followers. But when we read more closely, we sense that we’re also reading about Matthew’s community and those going out in Jesus’ name fifty years after his death on the cross. And that should not surprise us, because in this early Jesus community, there is always overlap between Jesus’ life and the disciple’s life. Matthew’s Jewish-Christian community is harassed and helpless in ways that we cannot fully understand. Perhaps this part of the Jesus community is now seen as heretical, as something blasphemous, as a kind of offense and if that is true there were no more calm discussions around the dinner table. Families are sundered. Religious communities are torn apart. And Jesus’ followers are afraid and uncertain. But they are not without help. First, they have these stories about their saints, Jesus’ *first* followers as well as the stories about Jesus’ own suffering and death. These stories remind them that are not alone in their tribulations. They also know the story does not end on the cross. In the gospel, death does not get the last word. Second, they have the living memory of Jesus’ compassion. In this morning’s passage, Jesus

comforts his disciples, addressing their fears *three times*, “Have no fear of them,” “Do not fear those who kill the body,” and “Do not be afraid: you are of more value than many sparrows,” he says. But this is not just the hearty encouragement of the athletic coach. Jesus tells his disciples not to fear because he points them to the Father, to the one who can still fear, give the gift of courage, and overcome death. There is much in this tenth chapter of the gospel, and it may inspire us to talk about religious conflict, the politics of first-century Judea, the nuts and bolts of mission, and the meaning of suffering. But Jesus wants to talk first about God. That is why he was sent, and that is why he sends his disciples: *to talk about God*.

There is a strange thing that takes place in the Mission Discourse. In verse 5 and 6, Jesus tells his disciples quite explicitly you are not being sent to the Gentiles, you aren't even being sent to Samaria. You are being sent to the lost sheep of Israel. But that's not the end of the story, is it? In the gospel's final chapter, Jesus says, “Go therefore and make disciples of *all* nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .” (Matthew 28:19). But Matthew doesn't edit out the contradiction. He lets it stand, and it does stand in all the gospels, like a clear and persistent thread. Jesus, Jewish teacher, Galilean prophet, keeps pushing the boundaries of the sacred and the profane, of Jewish and Gentile, people and nation: he heals a Roman centurion's servant and praises the centurion's faith; he asks a tax collector to be his disciple; he sits down with a divorced Samaritan woman and has a conversation; he has a pointed debate with a Gentile Syrophenician woman and lets her win; he calls yet another loathed tax collector down from a tree and invites himself to dinner at the fellow's house; he eats both with the socially dubious and the socially upright; he insists that his followers forgive their enemies and not just their friends; he sees wealth as dangerous but he still invites a rich man to be his follower. When he sees a boundary, he tests it. And we, in our context, may want to see that as diversity and inclusion, and it is, I suppose, but most of all, I think, it is his determination to say to his disciples and to us: God may be your comfort and strength, but you do not own God and you cannot control him. God creates and God loves. And

God loves who he wills. And so, Jesus seems to point to all these dubious folks and say, “Child of God, Child of God, Child of God.” And if we are to talk about mission, I believe that this is why Jesus was sent and this is why he sends *us*.

Jesus tells us this morning to be “wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.” As I consider that verse in light of my own life and in light of certain events in our own time, it seems to me that we are called—and we are being sent—not only to proclaim the good news that all human beings are created in the image of God, but to speak out when any of God’s children are being slandered, defamed, bullied, or demeaned. In the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, “But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” On this Pride Weekend we are not wrong, I think, to point out that in many places around the world that is exactly what is happening to LGBTQ people. It is an old and familiar tactic: it begins in the classroom, on the playing field, sometimes in the home, and all too often in the churches. The insult is meant to exclude and frighten, and sometimes worse. Mockery, taunt and insult wounds the soul, and Jesus tells us that that is no small thing. He asks his disciples to refrain from insult, so they can learn to love. Wise as serpents, innocent as doves.

We are not perfect here at Saint Mary’s. But I think we have some sense of what Jesus is up to with these words. We notice when Jesus crosses a boundary in order to love a brother or a sister and I believe that the people of this parish have long been called and sent to do the same.

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