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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, June 28, 2020**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 13/Proper 8/Year A**  
**First Reading: Jeremiah 28:5-9**  
**Second Reading: Romans 6:12-23**  
**Gospel Reading: Matthew 10:40-42**  
**Sermon Title: “Sent on Our Baptismal Mission”**

## **Theme**

*When Jesus sends his disciples out as missionaries, he warns them of persecution and hardships they will face. He also promises to reward any who aid his followers and support their ministry.*

## **Text**

[Jesus said to the twelve:] <sup>40</sup>“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. <sup>41</sup>Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; <sup>42</sup>and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

## Sermon

Recently I have departed from my tradition of preaching on the Gospel Reading, and have preached on the Second Reading from Romans. But today I want to go back to the Gospel Reading and since I have not drawn your attention to it for the last couple of weeks, I feel like I need to review what has been going on.

According to Matthew, Jesus had not confirmed the Twelve Disciples until Chapter 9. During the call process and in those early days of his public ministry, he went about preaching and teaching, and performing signs and miracles. And along the way, he gained quite a bit of notoriety.

In Chapter 9:33, Matthew wrote this about Jesus' public performance after one particularly powerful display:

<sup>9:33b</sup>the crowds were amazed and said, "Never has anything like this been seen in Israel." <sup>34</sup>But the Pharisees said, "By the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons."

So some loved him, maybe even worshiped him already, namely the Jewish peasant population. And some hated him already, namely those who were responsible for the orthodoxy of the Jewish faith (i.e., the priests, rabbis, scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees, and those in the Sanhedrin).

And then, at the end of Chapter 9, Matthew wrote,

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

So, for a short time, Jesus had been traveling about doing his thing with his disciples in tow. His role was to preach and teach and perform signs and miracles. The Disciple's role was to observe – to watch and learn, have their faith built up in him, and to learn his way.

And then, beginning in Chapter 10, probably sometime in that first year of his public ministry with his disciples, Jesus was ready to send them out on their first missionary journey without him mentoring them as they went.

We've probably all had that "first experience" whether it be in our vocation or our avocation. Maybe it was your first teaching job. You have the degree; you even had some student teaching. But then the day came when you got your first teaching job and 25 kids descended upon your room and it was showtime!

Doctors go through a lot of training, but the day comes when the doctor has to lay scalpel to the living flesh of a patient and cut. That must be terrifying.

I was thinking about firsts for myself, and I can honestly say, I don't remember the first time I preached – and that is probably a good thing. I think it may have been in my home congregation back in Jackson, Michigan, but it seems that I have blocked it out. No matter what your opinion of my preaching is today, 27 years ago it was rough. I do recall my first sermon at Zion. The size of the sanctuary and the number of all you was intimidating, and I was wooden at best. As you can see, I've gotten over that.

Well, Jesus selected these Twelve and they have had a few months of internship, and now, Jesus thought, they were ready to be sent out to multiply his ministry. The entirety of Chapter 10 is Jesus' locker room talk, his instructions, and his warnings about what they will likely meet. We don't have the time to review everything he said, but I am certain that for the Disciples, it was enough to make them weak in the knees.

Today's Gospel Reading is the conclusion of what Bible scholars have entitled, Jesus' "missionary discourse" - an entire chapter of Matthew's 28-chapter-Gospel dedicated to encouraging his disciples, and impressing upon them the importance of what they are about to do in his name. Do you feel the weight, the significance, the implication of what is going on here?

Well, that is all I'm going to say about it. I'm not even going to get into the text itself, because I sincerely feel called to bring this text into our present context.

I sense that we are in a significant moment in human history. The murder of George Floyd a few weeks ago has not been met with the same old insensitivity that previous murders of African-Americans have met. And let's be clear here, I am not talking about law-enforcement brutality. In George Floyd's case, it was a murder at the knee of a policeman, but in the case of Ahmaud Arbery it was three Caucasian-Americans who took it upon themselves to enact vigilante-style justice, which is not their right, and as it turned out, they were wrong about Arbery.

I hope that we can all agree that the world has a racism and prejudice problem. The United States is the current lightning rod for this problem, and while I do not want to deflect attention off of our problem here in the United States, there is prejudice and racism all over the world and most of the time it is directed at people of African descent.

Here is the thing that I think this Gospel text brings to this discussion: Jesus sent the Disciples out to do ministry on his behalf – yes, preach, teach, and perform signs and miracles, and much of the tenor of what he said had to do with how they would be received. Essentially he said, "You represent me, be gracious, and don't impose yourselves." That's it!

So what does this mean for us? I'm so glad you asked.

Our fellowship and the fellowship of New Beginnings Outreach Ministry have been providing opportunities for us to get to know each other for a few years now. Many of you have participated in those events, and I for one have come to appreciate the events and the people of NBOM, and I have grown in my appreciation of them as brothers and sisters in Christ, and I have sensed in myself a significant decrease in my inherent prejudice, but it is something I have to work at.

Last Saturday for example, I was invited to take part in the Juneteenth celebration at the Youngstown Amphitheater. If you have no idea what Juneteenth is, I had the same issue and had to educate myself. You should do the same, because it is the celebration of a momentous occasion in our nation, and for that reason, all people should be aware of it.

Anyway, I went and as it turned out, I was one of maybe three Caucasian-American clergy among a throng of African-American clergy. I did not expect anyone to

make a fuss over me, it was their event. They all had speeches to make and were greeting each other, and since not many of them knew me – because I have not associated with them – I was just this awkward Caucasian dude standing around. I could have left, and pouted about getting no respect, but I didn't. I took the initiative to introduce myself to them. Maybe that was my extending a "cup of cold water" to fellow clergy.

I know why I harbor prejudice – I am a work in progress, and I am working on it. And that is the point, I am working on it. I feel as though the Holy Spirit has put me in this place, in the city of Youngstown, for a reason, which includes the breaking down of racism and prejudice in me, and maybe in you too.

How else can you explain Pastor Trent driving by several other predominately Caucasian churches to introduce himself to me?

I hope you all saw the video that his predecessor, Pastor Carson and I made and released last week. I want to tell you that it was the easiest thing to make. We shot it in single takes within a matter of a couple of hours including travel time for Erik Vargo. That is because Pr. Carson and I genuinely like each other. Pr. Trent and his wife and Carol and I have been in each other's homes and have dined together before they moved on. We would do the same with the Carsons if it were not for this pandemic.

My point is that I feel that God is doing a work in our nation at this time. Do you feel it too? The murder of George Floyd has become that moment where African-Americans and Caucasian-Americans are saying, enough is enough. It is not okay to have two standards of tolerance.

I recognize I'm probably on thin ice with a number of you with what I've said already, but let me push a little harder.

The rebel flag is the symbol of a rogue movement of independence built on immoral human values that was defeated. I lived in North and South Carolina for six years and some still call the Civil War, *the war of northern aggression*. Every time I heard that, it was said, tongue in cheek. But if that rebel flag is offensive to my brother or sister Americans and reminds them of our country's complicity in slavery, then I say it should go.

I am not for redacting American history- it is what it is, warts and all, - but to have statues of leaders in our public places who were pro-slavery and fought on the side of upholding it is offensive to my African-American brothers and sisters, and honestly, it should be offensive to us too. I think they need to go.

I think we have arrived at a moment in history where we have an opportunity to offer a hand up rather than a knee on the neck. I hope you see that too.

In the same way that Jesus was trying to make his disciples aware of the importance of that moment in their time, I feel led to make you aware of the importance of this moment in our time.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

So Pastor, what are we to do? I'm so glad you asked.

Some of you will have difficulty with my message today. To you, if you are still listening, I ask, do you really think that prejudice and racism are God-honoring attitudes to have? Take time to reflect and repent and ask God to continue to send the Holy Spirit to do its work in your heart and mind.

Others of you will be stirred to try to do better, you just aren't sure how you can do that – you don't live near any African-Americans, you don't know any African-Americans.

Yea, that's a problem. I have found that for me, that my ongoing work of eliminating racism and prejudice in my life, takes work. I have to make opportunities happen with Pastor Carson. I have to impose and walk across the room to meet other African-American clergy and brothers and sisters in Christ. I have to put myself in a position to do those things if I want and expect anything to change in me, or in my community, or in my country.

Maybe that's what you have to do too.

The mission field of the day might just be changing our hearts, and the hearts of our brothers and sisters that have a different skin color but are members of the same one human race, so that all may come to enjoy the abundant life that Jesus Christ wants us all to enjoy, and that this country can provide.

## **Prayer**

God, have mercy on us. We, your creation, have sought to divide when you ask us for unity. We, your creation have used force to subdue others not like us, when your Son's example was that of mutual respect for all. We need to do better. Many of us want to do better. But we need your help. Expose the sin we want to keep hidden so that we can work to eliminate it in our lives. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen