

In last week's sermon, I told you how honored and blessed I feel to be the new pastor at St. John and Bethesda Lutheran Churches. Your reputation is that you are compassionate and committed people of faith in your communities. I feel a sense of pride in being invited to journey with you, especially in these unusual times. Let me start today with saying thank you. I am so glad I can be here with you.

So, on Tuesday I was in a clergy text study group that meets online. We are a consortium of Lutheran pastors from this area who read and discuss the scriptures for the coming Sunday. As my colleagues were exploring the nuances of the original languages and the cultural contexts of the time the scriptures were written, my mind kept going back to one thing—how can these scriptures inspire faith in the people of Dunlap and Moorhead?

Now there is nothing wrong with the excellent scholarship that this group does. It actually is helpful to our understanding of the amazing narrative of God's grace towards all creation. It allows us to listen in different ways and often compels us to ask tough questions. One that came up this week was from the gospel. Did you notice that Jesus sent his disciples out to do what he had been doing—but told them to avoid the Gentiles and go only to the Jews. In a time when we racism and discrimination are touching a raw nerve, this didn't sound "kosher." Jesus, the Son of God, who teaches his disciples that God loves everybody, promoting such seemingly prejudicial behavior? What's up with that?

Jesus' actual words (according to Matthew) were "Go nowhere among the gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, he told them to go only to the people that were very much like themselves. And he was intentional about that.

For many years, I read over those words, unintentionally choosing to focus on the proclamation of the good news, the healing of the sick, raising of the dead, cleansing the lepers and casting out the demons. It's almost as if I didn't even see them. But this

week, maybe because of all the things going on in our world, I couldn't get past those words. All I could hear was exclusion.

I thought about my own experience with people of other ethnic groups and cultures. I lived through the race riots in the late sixties. I saw kids fighting in the halls over racial issues when I was in Junior High. My dad was a policeman and I remember him talking about some pretty intense conflicts in Davenport where I grew up. There were attitudes and language in my home that am not proud of today and that I try not to perpetuate. That was a long time ago, but I worry that it might influence me even at this point in my life.

Twenty years ago, I made my first trip to the Northern Diocese of Tanzania in East Africa. I went with Sunni Richardson from Carol Joy Holling Camp in Nebraska. We were consulting with the Lutheran Church there about their youth camp and ways to engage young people in the church.

We arrived about ten at night. Our host was an official from the Diocese office. I had seen pictures of him from the Bishop in Nebraska and had been told he was a good man. I didn't see many people that night since it was very late as the Land Rover took us to our accommodations. The next morning, I got up and went to breakfast with my traveling companion. We were the only Caucasian people in the dining room. In fact, we were the only Caucasian people I saw that whole day. I learned that in Tanzania, there are only about 3% of the population that are white. When white skinned people go down the street the children start shouting "Mzungu" which means "white man." Other children come running to see what is not very common. I have to be honest. I was less than comfortable. I realized just how much I didn't know about people who were different from me. To be the one who was not like the majority was certainly outside my experience. More than once, I found myself being stretched to trust my hosts for things I could take care of myself back home, but was powerless to do in Tanzania.

I share that story as a way to understand Jesus' command to the disciples to stay within their own group. Sunni and I had done lots of work with churches in the US, consulting about youth and discipleship. Most of the time, the majority of those we talked to looked a lot like us. It was like second nature to work with those groups. They had shaped us. So when we found ourselves before an audience whose life experiences were different from our own, we could focus on what we had experienced in the past and grow from facing something new. I made four trips to Tanzania over the years, taking students from Midland University with me to help broaden the world they would live in. Every time I made new friends and as I learned about them, I learned about myself, too.

Jesus sent his disciples first to an audience that they knew. They were familiar with the culture since it was their own. They even had the same religious background and expectations. But Jesus was sending them with the message that the reign of God, a reality they had all longed for, was now at hand. After showing them what to do to spread that message, he gave them an opportunity to do it. Even in their own community, the message they proclaimed would be met with question in the least and sometimes even suspicion. To minimize the stress during their time of learning, Jesus instructed them to stay at only one place in a community and to greet the people there as they entered the house. If the greeting and kingdom message were not received, they were to move on. Jesus wanted them to get their start in ministry in a receptive and safe setting. And the ministry they were to do involved bringing healing and hope and freedom and life to their hearers.

Who wouldn't want to receive the assurance that they mattered to God—mattered enough that God would send someone to bring them the Good News of God's love for them? Right? As hard as it might be for you and me to understand, there are people who have experienced the faith community in less than positive ways. Maybe even some in our midst have met those who name the name of Jesus yet have not always lived out his characteristics and teaching. Jesus told his disciples that there were "wolves in sheep's clothing" out there—people who used religion to advance their own agendas. The wolves wouldn't take kindly to those who were committed to the healing,

liberating, life-giving ministry because it would compromise the intentions that focused on themselves. Jesus warned that even those close to them might move in those directions. But if they started in a safe, predictable setting, they would gain confidence in this mission. Later in Matthew, in fact we heard it last week, Jesus sent them into the world to proclaim the Good News and make disciples. That great commission, however, was given to those who were experienced in ministry in an ever-growing context and had grown in confidence in God's work in, with and through them.

Now back to the question that wouldn't let me go-- how can these scriptures inspire faith in the people of Dunlap and Moorhead? We've been going through a time of great chaos and change. Last week we rejoiced in the Spirit's presence hovering around that whirling swirling nothing that God used to start creation. We were comforted in knowing that in the midst of that undefined reality, God spoke light into being and proceeded day by day to bring order and clarity to the universe. We also acknowledged that in the Great Commission, to go and make disciples, we were given an assignment to bring order and clarity to our world today. And now in the gospel lesson we see Jesus encouraging those first steps of ministry in his disciples.

In many ways, we are back at first steps in this radically changed world that is less than three months old. There's a lot of whirling and swirling under the auspices of the Holy Spirit and you and I are eager for God to speak light into our daily lives. Today's lessons tell us that we can start right here, right now, locally, in our own community as we find ways to assure our friends, loved ones and neighbors that they matter to God and to God's people, the church.

Some of those ways may actually parallel the things Jesus tasked his disciples with: cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. We may not be able to cure COVID-19, but we can help our community avoid the spread by wearing face coverings in public. Raising the dead sounds a little out of our league, but what if we look at those who have been cut off from the community, town or congregation? What small acts of kindness and acknowledgement can we do to bring them back to life in our

midst? And cleansing lepers might correspond to speaking up for those who have been stigmatized and advocating for their recognition by others, maybe even the church. Today casting out demons might involve helping someone learn alternative ways to relate to others or to gain skills that help them make healthier decisions about how they live. You know the old saying about teaching a person to fish is better than just giving them one.

Pastor Luke Kuenzli from St. John in Mineola really brought the gospel home for me this week. He said, "Jesus is telling the disciples to go out and do something useful in their own neighborhood." I like that. It is the small things that build our confidence as we do them over and over. Like the daily training an athlete goes through builds strength and skill, the ways we live out our faith in the midst of our neighbors and family shape us to be more and more like Jesus. And it brings light and clarity to our communities.