

Packing List  
Church of the Redeemer  
Matthew 9:35-10:8  
The Rev. Mary Nelson  
18 June 2017

*May the words...*

Jesus goes out to the place where he preaches, and he sees the crowds, and he preaches to them, and he heals some of them. This is not an unusual sequence of events. He's been preaching for a while, teaching for a while, and we're halfway through Matthew's gospel by now so we've established pretty clearly that preaching and teaching and healing are just what he does.

But Matthew tells us this time that Jesus is preaching and teaching and healing in the cities and towns, and this time he "feels compassion for the people" because they are "like sheep without a shepherd." So he goes back to his disciples and he tells them that he's going to send them out as missionaries to these "lost sheep." And he starts equipping them to be—not just disciples, students, but to be apostles, "those who are sent out" to be teachers and healers themselves.

The harvest is ready, but the laborers are few, he says. Now is the time; there is urgency to this project; the people are hungry for spiritual nourishment, physical care, and I can't do it alone. You have to help. Ready or not, the time is now.

And he tells them how they're going to do this thing. Because what Jesus is teaching is not just a set of content, it's a way of life. The disciples are expected to model this way of life as they travel from place to place, teaching. He gives them a list of things to do, a list of things *not* to bring, and a list of things *not* to do.

(Interestingly, only Matthew's telling of this story has the list of things TO do.) Twice, he tells them not to accept any money for this work. Receiving the teaching and healing, learning the way of life, this program of Jesus' is not transactional.

Faith is entwined with action: identifying needs in our own community, and then meeting those needs. This is what Jesus sent his Apostles to do. Notice that Jesus didn't say, "go out and find all the lepers and cleanse them one-by-one, and then tell each one that you did it because Jesus told you to, and therefore they should love Jesus." NO! Jesus said "go figure out what people need, and give it to them." Jesus had compassion, because the people were "harassed and helpless," and he worked to figure out what their needs were, and meet those needs. And not everyone has the same needs. Jesus didn't send his apostles to attack a specific *problem*; he sent his apostles to have compassion on the *people*, to be loving shepherds to the lost sheep. Go out and find someone who needs help, and help them. Go out and see what needs to be fixed, and fix it. And don't do it for any kind of payment or reward; do it because you have been shown the same kind of love at some point in your life and weren't asked for payment. Go out and help, not because I told you to, but because *there is need*.

I don't think Jesus knew what his church would become. I don't think he knew that his teachings, his sayings, would be passed down for two thousand years, institutionalized in the way that they have been. I do think that Matthew's community wrestled with this institutionalization, and what it meant for them, as Jews and as followers of Jesus. They needed lists of what to do and what not to do, what to pack and what not to pack. Even now, these lists are comforting to some. It's comforting to have a plan, to have a set of rules, to have a map.

We have a map on our bulletins today. It's a plan of the New Heaven that was supposed to come down on earth. In New Haven we're proud of our claim to be the first "planned city," and this was the start of it. I was particularly pleased to note, when I first scrutinized this map, that some of these plots of land belong to women. In this New Haven, widows were taken care of, just as the ethics of Jesus' faith dictated.

But this map is only a start, we know. The nine squares the original founders plotted out weren't enough. The founders couldn't imagine, or didn't account for, the growth of the city beyond the nine squares, and as the city grew the grid fanned out and became offset. The farther out you go from the nine squares, the less "planned" this city feels, because the founders didn't have a plan for the rest of it. Was it a failure of imagination? Was it a failure of preparation? Was it a failure at all?

We're still making it up as we go along, in spite of historical precedent and zoning regulations and all the rest. And this 1641 map in front of us is not at all how we imagine this city now. It's about 90 degrees off. The top of this map is not north, as we see most maps today. The founders had a different point of orientation than we do now.

As we move into the next era of church—the next era for this congregation, and the next era of Church in terms of big-picture institutional history—we have to remember that we have very little in the way of a map. We have very little in the way of a packing list. We have a longer list of things NOT to do, things NOT to bring with us, and the lack of further instructions or plan can be a burden or an opportunity, depending on how we choose to approach it.

We are the apostles, the ones Jesus is sending out to preach and teach and heal. But we're also the lost sheep, the ones without a shepherd, trying to figure out how to build up this kingdom, trying to figure out what the plan is, what the map is, what the lists are. We need to be gentle with ourselves, with one another. We need to let it be ok that we don't really know what we're doing. We need to let it be ok that we're making it up as we go along. So were Jesus and his apostles.

And they did all right.

Thanks be to God. Amen.