

PROPER 6 A

Matthew 10:5-8

“Jesus’ Instructions for His Calling of Us”

We are witnessing confrontations between two groups of people on the streets of our cities throughout our nation. On one side are those called anywhere from patriotic protesters to angry anarchists. On the other side are law enforcement agents of some type. They have something in common. Both groups are receiving instructions from someone higher up. They are listening to someone tell them either to advance forward or to fall back and disperse. Anyone with military experience knows the feeling. The commander says advance, you advance; march, you march, retreat, you retreat.

Jesus is our spiritual general giving us our marching orders in this passage. We are fighting battles against sin, death and the power of the devil in a war that He has won for us by His life, death and resurrection. Jesus has drafted us into His spiritual army in the water and word of our holy baptism. “Onward Christian Soldiers” is not just a rousing hymn for us to sing, it is the way of life for us as followers of Jesus. The mission that our commander Jesus gives us today is to proclaim the kingdom of heaven, a life of faith that we display to those around us by the words we speak and the works we do.

Our Gospel Reading today begins with Jesus preaching, teaching, and healing. People who need what Jesus offers in physical relief and spiritual healing gather around Him. Jesus has compassion for the crowd, caring for them as if they were sheep without a shepherd to guide and defend them. Our world is full of such people who are harassed by the devil and helpless against the attractive advertisements of sin in our world. Like bugs to a zapper we are drawn to what we think is light for our lives, the easy money of gambling, physical pleasure with no strings attached, the attitude adjustment of drug/alcohol addiction, the excitement of the latest gossip. Before they know what hit them, the bugs are zapped. Likewise, before we know what hits us, the trap of our sin slams shut and we are caught, lost and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. The harvest of lost souls that was plentiful when Jesus walked the earth is still so today, with three-fourths of the world’s population non-Christian and many who claim to believe in Jesus are Christian in name only.

In this passage Jesus begins harvesting that plentiful crop of lost souls. He chooses 12 followers to be in charge of that. They are called apostles, meaning “sent ones.” Jesus gives them the missions of preaching His good news of salvation. While today we do not share in that original apostolic office, but we are followers of Jesus who have this mission of gospel proclamation. In our baptism not only did our Triune God make us part of this harvest of lost souls, Holy Spirit also equips us to be harvesters of other lost souls. We walk in the footsteps of the original apostles as we share our personal faith with others and teach the faith of the church to the next generation.

Jesus instructs 12 people to tell the world about Him. That is a big job, how could they do it? Jesus avoids this problem by telling His followers to start small, go first to the lost sheep of Israel. These are the descendants of God's Old Testament people, the ones gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai in our Old Testament reading. Begin by making disciples of that group. Then after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, they will go into all the world and reach people like us, non-Jews, the Gentiles.

These are smart instructions! Jesus knows how we think. If the project seems too big, we will put it off and do smaller, easier things first. I have planned to paint the parsonage porch but even during this shelter-in-place shutdown, it has been much easier for me to spend my time mowing grass and landscaping the yard. Jesus' instructions still hold true for us. We don't need to reach the four billion unbelievers around the world. We can set our sights lower, start small, reach out to just one person, in family, at work, next door, even someone within our congregation who has lost his/her way and forgotten Jesus. Go to one person this week and say, "The kingdom of heaven is near. Jesus is my Savior from sin and my hope for life. I want Him to be your Savior also." When enough of us do this the Holy Spirit will harvest quite a crop of faithful people for Jesus' kingdom.

The New Testament begins with both John the Baptist and Jesus preaching, "the kingdom of heaven is near." Jesus now sends His disciples out with that same message, "the kingdom of heaven is near." This is not a place, a map spot, a land with a border. It is where God lives and rules in the hearts and lives of those who love Him. For this kingdom to be near means that God is about to act. The place where our God has acted for us is the cross of Jesus Christ. There our God shows Himself to be the loving and faithful God in whom we can trust, love and believe for our lives. The kingdom of heaven is our God willing to live, suffer and die so that forgiven sinners can be His holy people once again.

The kingdom of heaven was alive and near for those first disciples of Jesus who was about to go to His death. The kingdom of heaven is still alive and near for us because Jesus has risen from the dead and lives forever. We can proclaim the nearness of this kingdom because it is within our lives through our baptism, open to our eyes and ringing in our ears in words of Holy Bible, and available for our touch and taste as the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper are also Jesus' body and blood for our forgiveness by Him and renewed faith in Him. Through these tools of God's Word and Sacraments the Holy Spirit works to make us part of God's heavenly kingdom on earth. The Spirit is at work in us so that we can recruit others to be part of that kingdom of faith as well.

Jesus gives us a battle plan as His baptized battalion, instructions as individuals in His infantry, commands as comrades in His cavalry. We have His authority over sin, death and devil to heal the sick, raise the dead, and cast out demons. The book

of Acts shows the apostles of Jesus doing just that by the power of the Holy Spirit. But these instructions sound like more than we can do. While our command of “be healed” may not bring about the same results today that the apostles achieved in Acts, we still can follow Jesus’ instructions. We have God’s Word that brings healing comfort to a person sick with disease or held in the clutches of a sinful life. The Word of God provides power to drive the devil out of any one of us. The Word of God raises us up from the death of our sinful existence to new life in God’s promised salvation.

Our sinful nature like to ask, “what’s in it for me?” When following Jesus’ instructions there is nothing in it for us, but there also is everything in it for us. We provide the gospel of Christ free of charge. We do not expect financial or material reward for sharing our faith in Jesus with others. We give Jesus to them freely, gladly and willingly. That is how Jesus was given to us. Our salvation and forgiveness are completely gift to us, not anything that we have earned or worked for. What’s more, God in His grace bestows an endless supply upon us. We don’t have to hoard it like rolls of toilet paper or keep it to ourselves like hand sanitizer. We can share God’s grace with others fully as God has given it to us freely. We do so knowing that everything awaits us. At the end of our tour of duty as Christian soldiers here on earth we have great veterans’ benefits coming to us. That will be eternal life in the presence and glory of our Triune God, something more than we could ever want or hope for.

Jesus has won the victory for us. He has made us part of His winning army, baptized believers in Him. We have His instructions for the battles that continue to wage around us in this life. Our mission is to show others in our words and works what life is like in the kingdom of heaven that Jesus gives us by His grace. Let’s go out to fight those battles and win others for Christ’s kingdom. Company dismissed! Amen.