



## **A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell**

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

Sunday, June 28, 2020

Scripture Passages: Romans 6:12-23 & Matthew 10:40-42

+ *In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Three short verses. Three. That's all we get this week for a Gospel reading. No parable, no long discourse, no healing story.

Just three short verses – but three short verses that speak *volumes* about how to be faithful to God in our world.

Three short verses that if I'd a mind, I could preach on for weeks. Don't worry I won't. But I could. Because amazing as it sounds, scripture speaks to our *everyday*; scripture speaks like it was chosen for *these* times.

So what's so compelling about these three verses – numbers 40, 41 and 42 from Matthew's Gospel chapter 10? Now spoiler alert: they are not comfortable verses, just so you know. They're not easy.

So do you remember a couple of weeks ago, Jesus looking out over the crowds that gathered every time he taught? Looking out with compassion. Remember what he said?

He said: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (9:37-38).

So, it seems now like Jesus meant for his disciples to answer their own prayer, because now in chapter 10, he is sending them out, two by two and gives them "authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness."

But. This is a deeply dependent "sending." While they're meant to be extensions of Jesus' own ministry: sharing the good news and healing and casting out demons just like he did, they are also to live as he lived: in poverty and dependence on those to whom he taught and preached to and healed.

And that's a pretty risky strategy, so Jesus gives them a pep talk of sorts – although there seem to be some pretty serious warnings in this pep talk. He says some tough stuff to them, I won't lie.

He warns them that they will not receive a welcome everywhere they go. They'll be mocked and they'll be hounded. If they are truly devoted to this law of love, they will encounter real opposition, probably within their own families because the love they preach will expose the unloveliness of human nature. It will call out the fragility and defensiveness of lives lived for gain and social power and self-centredness and *that* is dangerous work. It seems like the law of love which Jesus preaches is not for the faint of heart. But he promises that it's all worth it because "those who lose their life for my sake will find it." That's literally the verse before our three: verse 39.

Scholars tell us that Matthew, of course, is not only remembering Jesus' instructions to the disciples; but Matthew is also speaking to his own community of disciples a few generations later. And that seems right because we *know* there is a need in every generation to be those laborers sent out into the harvest; to be those sent out to join the mission of God to preach the good news out beyond the gathered community into the culture. It might be a different time, but people are people and the Church is still the Church so this all seems really familiar to us. So there's that.

But there's something else too. One of the things that I read this week about these three verses from Matthew encouraged me a lot. You know how sometimes we think of discipleship as a mighty effort; heavy lifting, strenuous, even earnest. But I was reminded that really, discipleship is a journey – "a long obedience in the same direction" as Eugene Peterson once said. Now discipleship *can* be costly. It *can* at times, contain all the things that Jesus warns about: persecution, pain, sacrifice. But equally, as he points out, it can be as simple as offering a cup of cold water to a thirsty one. You see, I was reminded that discipleship is not first and foremost about the grand gesture – it is about consistent acts of love.

I'm sure you've heard this quote attributed to Mother Theresa: she said, "not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love."

There is tremendous wisdom in these words. The small things may not be flashy; they may not even be seen. You know these things: the letter of loving encouragement you write to someone whose day is changed by it; the run to the store for the elderly neighbour; the visit or phone call you make to that person you know who is isolated; the message you send after someone has lost a loved one; the small cheque you write that joins with other small cheques which adds up to the ability to do a whole lot of good. These are small daily acts of love – governed by God's law of love. But small acts consistently performed with great love over time change the world. Yes, they do. And that, my friends, is the content of discipleship. The slow drip, drip, drip of transformation.

Given the realization of all that, let me ask you this: what would happen if we truly believed that we bear the presence of Christ to every person we encounter, online, maybe *especially* online – in the comments section and in our tweets and our Facebook posts? In the grocery store, in the workplace, in our volunteer work, or in every neighborhood we live in?

What would happen if we saw *every* conversation, every “like”, every comment as an opportunity to speak in love, to be people of peace – to regard *every* encounter as an opportunity to bear Jesus’ love for our neighbour? What if in every interaction we remembered that we bear the presence of Christ but also that we *encounter* the presence of Christ in the other person we are interacting with? Every person. Every. Person. Regardless of any difference that normally divides us? Race, religion, class, gender, being rich, being poor etc,... What if? Just hold that question in your minds for a bit. Because it’s so very important, we’ll return to it.

So let’s think about this in terms of our everyday. Let me tell you about something that happened this past week that really stayed with me and made me ask some good but difficult questions.

I had the opportunity to listen to a friend talk about what it has been like to live as a Black Christian in our Church. Now in all the years I’ve known and appreciated this friend, I have never heard them speak about their experience like that. I was moved to tears – first of righteous anger at what they’d experienced and then to tears of shame while listening to them. I felt shame first because I am part of a culture that is without a question, systemically racist. But I was also ashamed because I’d never thought to *ask* them about *their* experience. And as I heard the pain in my friend’s recounting of how they had been dismissed and diminished I felt frustrated with myself – frustrated that until now I had not got involved and asked questions – uncomfortable questions – and even more importantly got involved in righting the wrongs of prejudice and fear and suspicion because of difference that are embedded in our culture and in the church.

I was frustrated with myself because that’s not how God’s law of love works, is it? It’s a long way from what Jesus taught.

Because Jesus, sent by God to show us what God’s love looks and feels like, *reached into our world*; was pro-active in love and compassion and offered healing; walked alongside people in love; challenged the narratives that diminished, dismissed and divided them; restored people to the *centre* of community and ultimately sacrificed *himself* all so that we could be put right with God. God loves us *that* much.

So I’m going to go there this morning because you know, that kind of Gospel love *should* make us think differently and act differently; to seek more and more to become like Jesus.

Seeing as we are newly aware of the systemic nature of the sin of racism that divides us, and since we know *that* is against God's law of love and since we are disciples of that same God, what if, what *if* we went back to that question I posed a few minutes ago?

What if in every interaction with another person, we remembered that not only do we *bear* the presence of Christ but also that we *encounter* the presence of Christ in the other person we are interacting with? In every person. Every. Person.

Jesus says, "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

If we take these words to their logical conclusion it means some things. I mean, it means a whole *lot* of things, but let's keep it marvellously simple and stay with how it speaks to our here and now – this week - and to a specific problem and parse out for ourselves how our faith speaks to this problem.

So, I ask us all:

- What if we very consciously said no to the sin of racism in our diocese?
- What if we, consciously as disciples, truly *welcomed* those who speak new languages, bring new customs, and *welcome* them as the image of God among us?
- What if we moved *toward* newness and difference intentionally and embraced these things as gifts from God - and allowed the *diversity* of the family of God to expand our frame of reference for humanity?

You know, St. Paul talks about discipleship as something that leads to perfect freedom. And I get that. Because in becoming more and more like Jesus, we are set free from what binds us. We are set free from prejudice and suspicion and the burden of our own sense of superiority in order to love, honour and value the Christ in others.

I'm just going to leave that there for us all to consider – prayerfully and lovingly – and, dare I say, *selflessly*? Knowing that this is the content of discipleship: to *be* Christ to each other, to *recognize* and *greet* Christ in each other, to be guided by the law of love in all that we say and do, and to commit to all of that minute by minute, hour by hour and day by day in a long obedience in the same direction.

+*In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*