

The Answer to Our Prayers

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Matthew 9: 35-10:23

We probably always suspected it, somewhere in the back of our minds. And this gospel reading confirms it. Prayer is a dangerous activity. I'm not talking about praying in public in a foreign culture, where someone might be persecuted for being of the "wrong" religion. Jesus teaches us not to pray in public, anyway. No, I'm talking about just normal prayer. If we truly pray the way Jesus taught us to, it's a dangerous thing! If you really want to live on the edge, try it sometime. Just try praying with your whole heart, your whole mind and soul, your whole being, in the ways Jesus taught us to pray, for those he would have us pray and just see what happens!

Today's gospel lesson begins with just such a story. Jesus is going about through all the cities and villages of Galilee preaching the good news, and curing every disease and sickness. He's surrounded by crowds and he is moved in his gut with overwhelming compassion for them because their harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. And so in this tender moment of deep compassion he asks the disciples to pray that God will send helpers. He sees in these helpless crowds people whose lives are ripe for a new beginning, a new kind of life, ripe, that is, to be brought into the Kingdom God is bringing on earth. But, he just can't do it by himself, so he asks his disciples to pray that God will send helpers.

And you know what happens. The disciples' prayer is answered and the answer turns out to be them! Prayer is a dangerous thing! I mean, here's this group of rag-tag guys, one's a former tax collector, a lackey for Rome, one's on the complete other end of the spectrum, a former Zealot, someone who advocated violence against Rome, and then there are some assorted Galilean fishermen, and the rest we know nothing at all about. But, Jesus makes *them* the beginning of his new community and asks *them* to pray, and then sends *them* as the answer to those very prayers. I mean, they're just guys. So, dangerous enough for you yet?

And, we recognize the world into which they are sent. Harassed and helpless says it well. We know harassed and helpless from just trying to get some service done by Comcast or Verizon, you know, when you end up talking to someone in Pakistan who has no power to get anything done to help you at all! That's harassed and helpless. Sometimes, we know it just watching the Washington Nationals trying to score some runs. That seems harassed and helpless, at times. We know it when we or a friend or loved one gets a cancer test back that's positive. We know it watching people suffering from some degenerative disease, and from watching their primary caregiver.

We know it from people trying to make ends meet in a weak economy and paying \$4.00 a gallon at the pump. We know it from the video greetings we see on CNN, sent from parents and spouses to their loved ones in Iraq. We know it when we see the worried faces of the parents of those boy scouts caught in a Tornado while at scout camp in Iowa, and in the grieved faces of those who lost their sons, or the faces of those thousands left homeless by the floods there. We know it in the Chinese earthquake survivors, and in the cyclone survivors in Myanmar. That's harassed and helpless. We know it in kids who somehow feel compelled to take a gun and shoot at cars on the interstate, or who write profanity on church doors. Like sheep without a shepherd. We know it in our gut response to terrorism, and we know it in the terrorists themselves, because they are helpless, too, of course. They're helpless before their own frustration and hatred, helpless before their own ideology.

The list goes on. We recognize the world into which the disciples were sent, don't we? It's our world. Well, listen because in this story in Matthew, Jesus prepares the church for its mission! Jesus looks at this world and sees that these people are so "ripe" for a new way, a way where

they feel truly valued and deeply helped and no longer dogged by fear. The harvest is plentiful, he says. And Jesus looks at his disciples and says, “the answer is you.” Says Jesus, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Now this is not Jesus giving exclusionary advice. You remember at the end of Matthew's gospel, they are sent to the whole world, all the nations. No, this is just Jesus saying you don't have to go far to do this. The world is right here.

What's more, we know that when we hear him continue on by saying, “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues.” So, he's not just trying to start them off with an easy assignment! No, this is more like saying, “today's trouble is enough for today.” The world is right here. See, Jesus recognizes that that same world is in the disciples, too. He recognizes that part of their own helplessness is their helplessness before their own loyalties to country and religion and family. He knows that they will have to deal with that in themselves, and so he sends them to their own. And he says to them, “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have *them* put to death; and you will be hated by *all* because of my name.”

It's a rosy picture, isn't it? Stanley Hauerwas has pointed out that often in our time, Christianity is justified as a way of life that leads to order and stability. You know, “the family that prays together stays together.” But Jesus said, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” It's a hard saying, but I think Jesus is recognizing that humans are prone to make “family” into an idol. So, says Jesus, our fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters are now found as being *anyone* who's trying to do God's loving will. Jesus knows that we justify our violence in the name of protecting our loves, our family, our country, our way of life. And says Hauerwas, “it is exactly those loyalties that Jesus calls into question as he instructs his disciples.”

Perhaps if we really follow Jesus, we may very well still have a lot of folks against us. The world is right here, and it's in us, too. So, he says, here's the thing. “Proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom ... is at hand.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. ...Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff.” That is, he tells them to travel light because they are to have nothing to commend themselves to others except the love of Jesus, and they are to have nothing to depend upon except the grace of God. So, says Jesus to the disciples, “welcome to the church.”

Well friends, we are the church. And as a word of God for us, this text is pretty clear. Jesus doesn't say: here's your mission as the church... have a nice Sunday School and vital uplifting worship, and be sure to have an inviting new facility, so you can take in lots of new members to help you pay the bills and keep your facility nice. No, Jesus says, “Proclaim the good news that God's kingdom is near to you.” Jesus says, “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” Sounds simple enough, start with the Sunday School, then go after the Youth Group. You cured any sick people today? Raised anybody from the dead, lately? That's not the way we talk, is it? Not unless you want people to think you're a nutcase. But, you know what? I think if we think about all the harassed and helpless in our world, we know exactly what those words mean, right now. And I think if we really started seriously praying for all those harassed and helpless, even seriously praying about our own types of helplessness, we might even be led as a church to be the answer to those prayers.

We are not called to be significant or large. We are called to be apostolic. We are called to the mission Jesus gave to the twelve, which was the same as his mission. Cure the sick. Don't ignore the poisons that intoxicate us. Proclaim the power of God to heal us. Raise the dead. Do not leave any in their tombs. Proclaim the power of God's love to raise us up. Cleanse the lepers. Do not abandon the outcast and those we think are shamed. Proclaim the reconciling

love of God, who is making a whole new kind of community. Cast out demons. Do not accept the demonic powers of accusing and scapegoating others. Proclaim the love of God for enemies and the power of God to cast out the demonic powers of “us and them.” And finally, says Jesus, endure. Endure, that's all. Just keep doing my work in the world and leave the results to God. For Christ is risen, and Christ will come again, and again and again.

May it be so.