

June 18, 2017, 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

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Focus: In Jesus, the kingdom of heaven has come near.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus has simple marching orders for the church: "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment." That's it: simple.

Well, how's the progress going? If you missed the last council meeting, let me tell you it's not so great. For the month of May, I can say that we had 0 reports of cleansed lepers, we removed no demons from our church records, and as for "raising the dead?" We're still seeking out appraisals on the cost.

The truth is that a lot of stuff that Jesus says today is really hard. Of those things that I named, what can we really do? Well, some among us might be able to help heal the sick, right? Whether it's being a doctor, nurse, or member of a medical team, this is something that can happen. Or maybe it's as simple as being a good dad or mom or spouse and giving your kids love and medicine. But raising the dead, cleansing lepers, casting out demons, giving *without payment*, maybe not so much.

Well, thank God then that Jesus gives us other advice that we can all follow, and fortunately for us, it turns out that this is the most important one. He says, "As you go, proclaim the good news, the kingdom of heaven has come near." We can do that.

Now I can hear the objections already, "Pastor, we're Lutherans. When Jesus said this line about sharing the Good News, he was speaking to the Baptists and Evangelicals." Well, you might be tempted to think so after years of Lutheran interpretation. But after carefully studying the original Greek, it turns out Jesus actually means all of us! Yes, we, not just the pastor, you, me, all of us who are his disciples, even Lutherans, all of us who are baptized are called to go around proclaiming the good news, "the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Well, you might look at it and say Jesus is just being ridiculous again. Because it sounds really hard. Believe me: to me, too, it sounds as hard as performing some cutting edge brain surgery, as hard as cleansing a leper, or indeed, as raising the dead. I am right there with you.

But it's not because I don't like to speak to people (you guys know that isn't true) or because I'm embarrassed about Jesus. It's because at first at least, the message really doesn't seem to be true. Jesus comes into our world, this one, and has the nerve to say: "the kingdom of heaven has come near." Think about where we are **two thousand years after** the kingdom was already near.

Think about your life. Are the sick cured—or is it only after you get thousands of dollars worth of medical bills? Are the demons cast out—or do we still live in a world where families are separated, where there's abuse, where there's mental illness, where there's addiction, where greed seems to matter more than humanity? Are the lepers cleansed, or do we still judge people by their appearances and cast them out to the margins of society? Are the dead raised? Or do we still have to bury our loved ones?

After a week of fire and shootings from the powerful to UPS workers who were simply showing up to do their jobs to national scandal and distrust, that kingdom of heaven that Jesus promised was so near two thousand years ago doesn't seem to be getting any closer. So I don't think it's just quiet, shy Lutherans who have a problem carrying this message. I think we can reasonably ask each other—I think we can reasonably ask God: How are we supposed to go into this world of disease, of lepers, of demons, of death and say that the kingdom of heaven has come near?

The reason is because it's not up to us. The reason is because Jesus already has been here.

We make a mistake if we turn this story into just marching orders for the church. We trivialize its importance when we make it all about us. We rob this story of its meaning if we turn it into a playbook.

No, this story is about Jesus who comes into this world and what does the Gospel of Matthew say? Jesus sees that we are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Now all of us can relate to that. How many times in your life do you feel harassed and helpless? How many times in your life do you need some sort of direction where you feel lost and you don't know which way to go? How many times do we need our shepherd?

The message of this story is that whenever in your life, you come to a point when you feel harassed, when you feel helpless, when you feel directionless or aimless, Jesus sees you. You are never so lost that you will not find your way back to him. The message is: you are not as far from heaven as you think.

Jesus sees you—not as a God up in heaven keeping score of lepers cleansed vs. times you've taken his name in vain—but **Jesus sees you**, and what happens? We hear “he had compassion on them.” This is a weak translation. We have compassion on all sorts of things. What it really says in Greek is that Jesus is moved in the depths of his body. On this Father's Day, we might think of the kind of love a dad has for a son or a daughter. That gut feeling of love, of kindness, that gut feeling of sadness, of pity, of wanting to help. That fatherly feeling that you would do anything to make sure your child comes out ok because you're my son, or “daddy's girl”. This love is soft, it's tender, and when Jesus sees you, he is moved deep within him to that love for you.

It is in that love that the kingdom of heaven comes near. It is **not** in outward signs of prosperity, it's not in the sudden in-breaking of peace, or in massive conversions to Christianity, or in physical wellness that we can say that the kingdom of heaven has come near. But it is in Jesus the god from heaven come down in the man from Nazareth that the kingdom has come near. Jesus has come near to us. Harassed and helpless—even forsaken—on the cross, he has seen us with eyes of forgiveness and love. In the cross, we see for a moment everything that is wrong with our world: in the cross, we see cruelty, casting people out, the devil himself, and death, but if we look there to the cross, we also find that we are not without a shepherd. The kingdom of heaven is never nearer to us than when Jesus loves us from the cross.

That message is Good News. It is a message that will play, that is true to the Gospel and to people's lives, that we need not be ashamed to share. Who in your life do you know who feels harassed or helpless or in need of direction? Jesus's love from the cross is for him/her, too. The message is not “join this church,” but “Jesus sees you and loves you. You are not far away from

him.” His love for us and for all people is why we give of our joy, of our message, of our money, even of our food to those who feel helpless without expecting anything in return.

In our time, the kingdom hasn’t fully arrived yet. But when we trust in Jesus’s promises sealed in the blood of the cross, when we hear his word and share in his supper, we see the kingdom of heaven is nearer to us than we thought. And that Jesus has come into our lives with very Good News. **Amen.**