

July 3, 2022
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Even the Rocks

Isaiah 55:8-13; Luke 10:1-12

So what do we have here? We have Jesus, shortly after he feeds the 5000, sending 70 of his followers out into the world to proclaim the coming kingdom.

We have the details of his instructions:

He sends them.

He warns them of danger.

He insists on urgency, telling them to go only where they're headed.

They are to focus - and not move from house to house.

When they arrive, they are to offer peace, and accept the food and drink given to them.

They must share their giftedness, healing those in need.

And then, finally, they are to shake the dust of unreceptive towns off their sandals.

And then there's a worrisome bit here at the end about woe.

This is a complicated passage. There's a lot of insider language.

But, before we move on, I need to point something out. There's a lot of mis-information about the sins of Sodom, so if I can remind you of Jade's sermon a few weeks ago: according to

Ezekiel, “Sodom’s sins were pride, gluttony, and laziness, while the poor and needy suffered outside her door” (16:49).

Which should give us pause.

But the destruction that befell Sodom doesn’t seem to be Jesus’ intention here: in the chapter just before, when Jesus is not received by the Samaritans, James and John offer to command fire to come down from heaven and consume the village, but Jesus rebukes them.

So, there seems to be woe for those who miss the invitation to the kingdom of God, but it doesn’t seem to be one of fiery destruction. And it certainly isn’t to be doled out by the followers of Christ.

Instead, the ritual departure from an unwelcoming town was to be brief: any repercussions for missing the kingdom was to be between the town and God.

The Christ followers were are not authorized to stand in judgement.

As I read this, I recognized that so much of these instructions require the disciples to let go of control:

Pack nothing,

Only go where you are sent,

Offer peace and healing without hesitation

Resist the control of owning judgement, and the self-satisfaction tied therein

And while all of that is powerful, and important, as I was studying this scripture, something else kept rising to the surface.

When we read this same story in Matthew, Jesus only sends 12.

There's a couple options to explain this seeming discrepancy: either by the time Luke who wrote his Gospel later than Matthew, recorded the story he had more complete information.

Or the authors were telling the same story of Jesus sending out his disciples but through their discernment of what Jesus was up to.

See, numbers are so important in the Bible.

Twelve often symbolizes the 12 tribes of Israel, signifying the totality of their nation.

So in this telling, Matthew could have been saying that Jesus was sending out the disciples to bring this message to all the Jewish nations. That Christ was first most concerned with his people — that this kingdom message was first for them.

But Luke's Gospel is in many ways focused on the expansive inclusiveness of Jesus's ministry — beyond the tribes of Israel. And as he re-told the story of the sending, he documented that

Jesus sent 70, which was a number that, at that time, would have symbolized all the nations of the known world.

And Luke's expansion of Jesus' instructions extended to not only to the disciples staying in worthy homes, but for them to eat and drink what was offered, which would have been shocking.

You see, because of kosher laws, Jews were not traditionally allowed to eat with gentiles and yet this command foreshadows a vision Peter would later have in the book of Acts where God commands him to go and stay the home of a Gentile, declaring that no food or drink that God had made clean would be unclean (Acts 10).

These passages capture that Jesus was continually doing a new thing. The former restrictive laws were shifting. Suddenly, all were included. None were excluded except by their own agency.

And this is important. No one was forced to believe. And no disciple was given the power of judgement. The decision to embrace the coming kingdom was exclusively between God and the hearers.

Now, I can't definitively tell you the reasons or motivations of Matthew and Luke as they recorded this event, but what I can say is that what I am reading here is a ongoing invitation to draw the circle wider.

Chronologically that's what's I see happening here: In Matthew it's all 12 tribes, In Luke, it's all 70 nations, and by the time Acts was written, the command was to take this message to the ends of the earth (Acts 1).

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Perhaps what we can witness from this trajectory, is that none are beyond God's mercy. None are beyond God's love.

We are the messengers of this divine good news. And we don't get to pick the who or the where.

We don't get to choose ideology, politics, sexual preference, gender, race...

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The message as I read it is that we are part of this ever-widening expansiveness of God's kingdom.

Therefore, instead of building walls of exclusionary dogma, the *thems* and the *others*, we are sent to break down these unholy dams, which have attempted to control and hoard the streams of mercy as though they were an exhaustible resources, a limited commodity.

We are sent out to share the expansive inclusivity of the coming of the kingdom of God. Of the overflowing, unconditional abundance of the love of God. So may we proclaim, may we recognize that the kingdom is for all.

May we shake the dust of prejudice, bigotry, and religious superiority off our sandals
challenging ourselves to ask: how broadly can we now draw this circle?

What is the next rung to which we are called?

Perhaps the earth herself?

To the very soil upon which we stand

The birds of the air

The fish of the sea

"the mountains and hills

Which burst into song before God,

and all the trees of the field

Clap their hands in praise..." (Isaiah 55:12).

And are we moving through this world as though we understand that kingdom of God is not
limited to only to humans - or even to the humans we like?

Do we recognize the expansiveness of Jesus' prophesy that even the rocks cry out in praise?

(Luke 19:40)

Do we live lives of witness and proclamation that humanity is not the only creation that matters?

Can we avoid the woes of receiving so much without acknowledging that it is by caring for others and the earth herself, we live as though we are blessed?

Could our proclamation of the all-inclusive kingdom of God be for all?

And can we be a part of this circle actively getting wider?

What does this look like? How do we live with the active recognition of the inclusivity of the kingdom of God expanding well beyond our accepted historic boundaries?

May I share with you a story of St Francis of Assisi, who push these accepted boundaries well?

One day,

Father Francis and his companions were making a trip, when suddenly, Francis spotted a great number of birds of all varieties. There were doves, crows and all sorts of birds. Francis left his friends in the road and ran after the birds, who patiently waited for him. He greeted them in his usual way, expecting them to scurry off into the air as he spoke. But they did not move.

Filled with awe, he asked them if they would stay awhile and listen to the Word of God. He said to them: "My brother and sister birds, you should praise your Creator and always love him: He gave you feathers for clothes, wings to fly and all other things that you need. It is God who made you noble among all creatures, making your home in thin, pure air. Without sowing or reaping, you receive God's guidance and protection."

At this, the birds began to spread their wings, stretch their necks and gaze at Francis, rejoicing and praising God in a wonderful way according to their nature. Francis then walked right through the middle of them, turned around and came back, touching their heads and bodies with his tunic.

It has been said that the brothers who journeyed with him stood in amazement. Then he gave them his blessing, making the sign of the cross over them. At that they flew off and Francis, rejoicing and giving thanks to God, went on his way.

Later, Francis wondered aloud to his companions why he had never preached to birds before. And from that day on, Francis made it his habit to invoke all birds, all animals and reptiles to praise and love their Creator. And many times during Francis' life there were remarkable events of Francis speaking to the animals.¹

May the purity of that legendary meeting inspire us to break down the walls we have constructed — intentionally or unknowingly.

May we recognize that God's kingdom is actually for all: All humans, and animals, and rocks, and trees...

May we continue to find ways to de-center ourselves from the narrative, to let these ancient scriptures remind us that it is God's kingdom into which we are invited - not the other way around.

¹ John Feister; franciscanmedia.org

Benediction:

“Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures, especially through my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and you give light through him. And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor! Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars; in the heavens you have made them, precious and beautiful.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air, and clouds and storms, and all the weather, through which you give your creatures sustenance.

Be praised, My Lord, through Sister Water; she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire, through whom you brighten the night. He is beautiful and cheerful, and powerful and strong.

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, who feeds us and rules us, and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Be praised, my Lord, through those who forgive for love of you; through those who endure sickness and trial. Happy those who endure in peace, for they will be crowned.”

— St. Francis of Assisi