

## Life of discipleship

Each week, the question we are trying to answer is how does this week's reading reveal the kingdom of God? We've seen healing, casting out demons. We've seen Jesus' power even over death.

Today's reading shows that proclaiming the Kingdom of God will sometimes result in truly amazing and wonderful things. But it also shows that the kingdom of God will sometimes meet stiff opposition...even violent opposition. Sometimes that opposition will come from the powers that be...the Herods of the world. Other times it will come from within our own circle.

We've essentially got three separate vignettes here. At first glance, it may not be clear how they all fit together. But notice the way this is put together. In the center, we've got the story of Jesus sending the 12 apostles out as missionaries...and very successful missionaries at that. But that story is bracketed by two stories of disaster.

So let's dive in and see what today's text has to say to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century church. Spoiler alert – it's not really very much different than it was then.

We start out in Jesus' hometown. In spite of his growing fame and following, the people who know him best are skeptical. Isn't this just Jesus, the carpenter's son? An ordinary guy? Who does he think he is?

And their unbelief limited Jesus' power. You might wonder how that could be. Shouldn't God's power be able to overcome unbelief? Well, yes. And sometimes the power of God's word does overcome unbelief. Unbelief doesn't make Jesus less powerful. But God does not work by force. God works with us and through us. Unbelief can have a dampening effect on God's ability to work through us.

We live in a time in the church when lots of what we read and hear about the church provokes anxiety. The church is declining...its members are aging. People fear their church may not last much longer.

In that sort of environment, unbelief can have people convinced that God can't do anything with a dying church. And so, already convinced they're done, they quit trying. Unbelief doesn't make God less powerful. But it does make us less open to the things God can still do through us.

And when doubts assail us, look what happens when Jesus sends the 12 into the towns and villages. People are healed. Demons are cast out. People hear the good news of the kingdom of God and are urged to turn back...to repent...to turn back to the way of life God intended. And many do.

But, this repentance will not be forced.

It's important to look at how Jesus wanted the apostles to approach this. They don't bring along their polished PowerPoint presentations and religious tracts printed on high gloss brochure paper. They don't search for the best hotels to hold their revival. They aren't supposed to bring money, or even an extra tunic. They aren't even all that good at understanding what they're supposed to preach. Throughout Mark's gospel, the disciples never really do get what Jesus is about.

Instead of polish and glitz, they go into the villages with a gentle, simple, humble presence. They graciously receive whatever accommodations are offered. They depend completely on the villagers for sustenance. It's their way of depending on God.

And they carry the same message John the Baptist did and the same message Jesus began his ministry with – the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news. And with Jesus' power working through them, they healed and got rid of demons. It was never about them or their own power and ability.

Then we move to the story of John the Baptist's execution. It seems at first like a weird place to put the story. It had already happened at this point. It's a flashback.

But here's the thing...it's also a flash forward. This is a foreshadowing of what will happen to Jesus. And even more distressing, it's a foreshadowing of what will happen to the apostles. Their proclamation of the kingdom and their call to repent will sometimes result in amazing works and profound conversions.

But the message is hard to believe, even to some of those in Jesus' closest circle. And it will be downright threatening to those in power. Eventually this gospel message will be so threatening to the powers that they will seek to destroy the kingdom.

OK, so at this point we need to look at some of the parallels to the mission of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century church. I alluded to the first issue earlier...unbelief. Do we really trust that the church is in God's hands? No matter how small we are, do we believe that God can do amazing things through us? Do we trust that God is working through us and we don't have to depend on just our own intelligence and ability?

We can't conjure up that faith on our own. But we can pray. So the first bit of guidance for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century church is to pray. To pray that God will lead us to the places where the good news of the kingdom really does have power. To pray that God can use the church in healing and ridding our own world of demons, even though that might look different than it did for those original 12.

And then there's the question of how we share that good news. Evangelism is the proclamation of good news...in this case the good news of the Kingdom of God's arrival. A new way of life...a new world...is on the horizon, and it arrives on the shoulders of Jesus.

But evangelism has been done so poorly so many times. We have to deal with a legacy of terrible Christian behavior.

We think about forced baptisms by early missionaries to far flung lands. We think of Christians who have spewed hatred to people who are different from them.

We think of street corner preachers spouting scripture verses and condemnation to people on city sidewalks headed to the bars or smoking cigarettes or not wearing appropriate clothing.

We think of certain faith traditions knocking on our doors with their religious tracts.

None of us wants to do any of that.

But it's not really what Jesus had the apostles do here. Instead, they're to enter a town gently, humbly. They share meals with people in the community. One can imagine that maybe that's where most of their sharing happened. In a conversation around the table, they spoke about this man Jesus who has completely changed their lives and whose promises of a new world have them convinced, even though they still don't really get it.

I think that's our call too. Not to be loud or intrusive or forceful, but gentle, humble. We're to tell the story of our own encounter with Christ and how it's shaped our lives. We're called to share how we've come to believe in his promise of a different way of life, even if we really don't understand it completely either.

We're called to speak out against the demons of our own time, even though we understand them differently. We're called to pray for the sick. And although our prayers may not always directly result in physical healing, the work of the 21st century disciples of Jesus can bring about more just ways of structuring the healing arts.

But then, just as Jesus instructed the disciples, we leave it in God's hands. It will sometimes be met with acceptance and transformation. It will sometimes be met with skepticism and even derision. How people respond is not our problem.

And we also need to be prepared to meet strong...even violent opposition. Because the powers that be do not want the kind of world the kingdom of God is any more than Herod did. Or Caesar. They don't want a world where the meek inherit the earth and where gentleness, humility, and love trump might and wealth and retaliation against our enemies.

The power underneath those powers is the power of evil – Satan. They are the powers of death.

And that is a formidable power. We don't even want to have people make fun of us, let alone chop off our heads.

But the power of evil is no match for the power of God's reign. Ultimately, the power of love...the gentle, humble story of a new world...of heaven brought to earth...the power of the cross...ultimately, that power will win out.