

The readings for Sunday, June 18, 2017:

First reading and Psalm

Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

Second reading

Romans 5:1-8

Gospel

Matthew 9:35-10:8, (9-23)

In many modern churches, especially in the time around Pentecost, we spend a lot of time talking about mission, even if we're not realizing we're talking about it. Does the church exist to serve the members? Does the church exist to serve the community? And what do we mean when we talk about the church anyway?

In this Sunday's Gospel, we get a very different vision of the early church than we'll get in parts of Acts. In Acts, we often see the early believers arguing about doctrine, like who gets to belong and who doesn't--and once we've decided who gets to participate, there are debates about how to participate.

In this Sunday's Gospel, we see a vision of the early church in the way that Paul will practice it; to use a word that I see slung around frequently, we see a missional field. Jesus gives instructions to his disciples to go out taking very little with them: no food, no money, not even a change of clothes. Their mission: "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons."

And what will they get for their troubles? They will be flogged in the synagogues and drug before rulers, where we assume a gruesome death will follow. Their message will divide families, but they are to persevere, to endure.

It's not a grow-the-church kind of message. Who would sign up for this mission? I'd much rather plan for Vacation Bible School or figure out how to pay for a new roof for the building.

I think about those early disciples, what they must have seen and heard as they followed Jesus--and how his message did not fall on deaf ears. They went out and followed his instructions and I would argue they formed one of the largest social institutions in the history of the world (but I am also biased, I admit).

Are we to do the same thing? Or should we see these words of Jesus as metaphor?

I would argue that the answer to both questions is "Yes." There are many ways to announce that the vision of God for our world is at hand. And there are many ways that we will be rebuked for that message.

This passage leapt out at me this morning: "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10: 16). I have spent much of the past nine months feeling like a hopeful, optimistic lamb, making predictions about the world that prove to be terribly wrong, misreading many of the people in my various communities. It wouldn't surprise me if many of us feel the same, even if the triggering situations are different.

Let us all be wise as serpents and innocent as doves--that mission is as important now as it ever was.