

I spent a couple days last week visiting with my best friend who lives in Minnesota. Since airfare has gotten so expensive, we looked for somewhere that was equal-ish driving distance, and the answer was Indiana Dunes—one more National Park to cross off the list. We've traveled together (and separately) often, including internationally, so I know we are both capable of packing for a week or even two in only a carry-on suitcase, but since this time we weren't flying and didn't have to pack efficiently, we didn't. In fact we talked about how nice it was to just open up the car and throw in anything and everything we thought we might need. Long sleeves, short sleeves, swim suits, rain coats, shoes, snacks, I believe I had six different bottles of sunscreen...we were ready for anything the terrain and the weather could throw at us. You know what we got? A warning to seek shelter immediately from the tornado that touched down in the next town over. Weren't ready for that. All our preparations turned out to be much less important than the hospitality of the staff at a restaurant housed in a very substantial looking brick building. Although literal tornadoes are not common in Israel, Jesus seemed to know a thing or two about the figurative storms his disciples might encounter as he sent them out to proclaim the good news.

Matthew tells us that Jesus himself was traveling from town to town, teaching, healing, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, when he notices that the people were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. That was a dangerous observation to make, or at least a subversive way of describing it, because ancient rulers and religious leaders liked to style themselves as caring for those in their charge like shepherds caring for sheep. The twenty-third psalm lifts up the Lord as the one who can truly fulfill the vision of protection and provision claimed by earthly leaders. Jesus essentially is saying that all those who were supposed to be in authority had dropped the ball: the Roman government, King Herod, the Pharisees and Sadducees—none of them were doing their job of caring for the harassed and helpless crowds, the lost sheep of the house of Israel. When Jesus sees this, he has gut-wrenching compassion for them, and, being only one person and term-limited at that, sends the twelve disciples out to do the same work of healing, casting out demons, raising the dead, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.

This, too, is a rebellious act on Jesus' part, because normally the "good news of the kingdom" that the people would have heard was the propaganda of the Roman Empire. Rome would conquer a nation then send emissaries to the towns and villages to put a spin on that announcement, *Good news, you're part of the empire now!* But the Pax Romana, the Peace of Rome, was not true peace; it was order enforced by intimidation—the presence of soldiers and the threat of the cross. The kingdom of heaven that Jesus tells the disciples to announce is a different kind of kingdom—one that does not

derive its authority from military force or the coercion of state sponsored terror. Rome announces their “good news” with a legion of soldiers to back them up; Jesus sends his disciples to announce the good news of the kingdom of heaven without even a walking stick to protect themselves.

Jesus’ evangelists are doing risky work by announcing the good news of this alternate kingdom. The content of their message challenges Rome’s authority and values, thereby exposing them to the accusations of sedition that would get them handed over to councils and dragged before governors. But even the method of their mission involves a leap of faith: without bringing anything to make them self-sufficient, they have to rely on the kindness of strangers. They have to ask to stay; they can’t force their way in (like soldiers in an occupation could). If they find a household willing to welcome them, they are to stay there, even if they get a better offer from someone with nicer accommodations, tastier food, or more influential friends. Jesus sends them on a mission of vulnerable mutuality: they have something to share, but they are at the mercy of others’ generosity to receive what they need in return, because genuine hospitality is about giving charity, but also recognizing one’s own needs and being willing to accept what others offer.

Not everyone will be receptive to the disciples’ good news...but even then, Jesus instructs the disciples to act with grace: *If anyone will not welcome or listen to you, shake the dust off and move on.* Notice Jesus doesn’t say, *If anyone will not listen to you, curse them...or threaten them will hellfire and damnation...or use force to make them agree with you...or get the government to take away their rights...*All of those methods of “advancing the kingdom” have been used by Christians throughout the history of the church up to and including now...but none of them are the way that Jesus instructs his disciples to handle the rejection of his message. Love that is coerced isn't love. Shaking the dust off isn't a condemnation of the town; it's an encouragement to the disciples to keep doing their good work where they can succeed in doing it. You take a hit, but you shake it off and keep going.

There’s a joke about not knowing how the ELCA got “Evangelism” in its title, because the last thing Lutherans tend to want to do is evangelize. And in our defense, evangelism has gotten a bit of a bad rap, in no small part because of those harmful ways it has sometimes been attempted—bullying and ultimatums, selectively misusing scripture to demonize and dehumanize—instead of the mutual exchange of charity and hospitality that Matthew describes here. But the truth is that we have been given good news to share: Jesus invites us to live in a kingdom where love is the language and mercy is the law. It’s a very different way of life than the empires of the world would have us live, so not everyone will trust that it will work. But Jesus sends us out to make the invitation anyway. May God give us compassion for those whom we see harassed and helpless and make us instruments of the peace that God so desires for our human community and the whole world.