



SPIRIT IN THE DESERT

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

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. [Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.”

“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”

Grace and peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

One thing I think I could do successfully from the list of instructions Jesus gives his disciples is run!

It reminds me of when some other kids and I were walking through an alley and discovered how fun it would be to take oranges that had fallen from the trees and roll them under cars driving by. It was exciting to aim perfectly enough for a tire to splatter the orange.

To us it was harmless but for some reason, we were hiding in the alley as we rolled. It was like bowling, but it didn't knock any pins down.

Evidently, the people who lived in the houses did not think it was so fun. A man came out through his back gate and blocked one end of the alley. We turned and ran the other way, only to find a car blocking our escape.

I had never been so scared. My friends were yelling, "Run! Run!" And I was thinking, *where am I going to run? We're blocked in on both sides!* I might as well just turn myself in.

I was always the one who was paranoid about getting in trouble. Mike Calori grabbed my shirt and yelled, "Run, Henry, run!" We sprinted toward the parked car and slid across the hood like something out of a *Lethal Weapon* movie.

We got away but to this day I cannot drink fresh squeezed orange juice without wanting to turn myself in to somebody.

You have to know when it's time to run. According to Jesus, there is a time when debate is simply interfering with the work of compassion.

Why does Jesus say to go into the homes to proclaim the good news? I think it is because to be on the margins does not mean to be on the outskirts of society. The margins are also in the pews. In the back row of any church there are some that come accompanied by shame, desperately longing for the good news of acceptance from the God of peace. They silently pray for help as they go unnoticed. The closest someone comes to them is when the offering plate is handed to them. More shame occurs when they have nothing to make their "spiritual" transaction.

So how are we and the disciples to carry out this compassionate work in the face of potential opposition? How? How do I do the miraculous healing in other people's lives when I am not Jesus? How can I free people from the demons of self-consciousness, insecurity and oppression? How can we do all these things when you said to take nothing with us? Jesus, remember when you said if they ask for your coat give them your shirt also? We will eventually be arrested for indecency if we keep giving our clothes away. I am afraid of being naked in this work of compassion.

Why can't we arm ourselves instead of always running when danger arises?

So Jesus, are you saying that we should just be a nuisance in the alleyways of our neighborhoods?

Maybe that's not the intention, but we might be a nuisance to some when we follow the same instructions Jesus gave his disciples.

This work sounds hard and quite subversive, like tossing oranges and running.

It is subversive and it is counter to an individualistic culture.

But perhaps when at times it is subversive and a counter-cultural act it is closer to the instructions of Jesus. This kind of work brings liberty, it does not embarrass God, and it is always loving to self, loving to others and loving to the one who has given the authority in these passages.

If creative compassion is counter to traditional institutional theology, yet honors the way of Jesus, it may be life-giving to those on the margins and to us. If it reinforces orthodox traditions or a prescribed biblical interpretation, stay agile, my friends. Others may challenge you, claiming greater authority than your compassionate and creative love.

The goal for the disciples, as Walter Bruggeman says, is to bring healing and liberation to the margins of society without extracting a fee. Availability to those most needy is a subversion to a system that allows the excessive monetization of critical health and well-being for both physical and spiritual life. To profit on the backs of the most vulnerable may be one way to do things, but I think we can say without debate it is not the way of Jesus.

Maybe for the disciples, arming themselves for this mission would make them part of the systemic problem.

In his instructions to the disciples, Jesus pivots from a ministry of personal miracles to a society of creative love and healing.

This will indeed subvert any imperial system and well... you better run.

Jesus seems to be saying that if you sense your audience strongly opposes where you're coming from, leave—and don't carry with you the dust of resentment, fear, or controversy. No whining! Just leave, dust yourself off, and start all over again, bringing liberation to those who have been pushed to the margins.

Jesus said something particularly important for our well-being, he said, "let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you." Don't let someone or something take your peace and joy.

According to Jesus there is a time when debate with oppositional forces is simply interfering with the work of compassion.

There are many incredible missions out there that do just this. Doctors that are defying the system by getting together and offering care to the most vulnerable. A free dental clinic started by my friend Dr Kris Volchek in 2001 called the Brighter Way Institute. They serve veterans, homeless, and low-income. Churches are now buying up medical debt in their communities and releasing families from their burden and many, many more.

There are so many ways we can carry out the instructions of Jesus but there will always be a cost. Perhaps this is why the laborers are few and the need is so great.

Here is a question or two for all of us to answer the how?

How am I uniquely gifted to join with Jesus in the counter-culture work of healing and restoration?

How can I proclaim the good news of welcoming those who may feel emotionally or literally orphaned?

What things do I need to lay down as weapons and walls of self-preservation?

Who are the “harassed and the helpless” in my world Jesus says to care for?

What might be the cost for me to fulfill the instructions from Jesus?

What might be the glorious freedom that comes from untethering myself from the empires of my world and seeing the kingdom of heaven draw near on earth?

Amen