Pentecost 4 Proper 8

June 28, 2020

Matthew 10:4-42

Often, when we read the Bible, we ask ourselves, “What does this text tell me God wants me to do?”

This is a fine question, but it allows us to think legalistically about the Bible, as if it’s God’s little instruction book for us, and nothing more.

But, of course, we know it’s more than that. The Bible contains Law *and* Gospel. So if we’re not meant to think in a legalistic manner about all of Scripture, there must be a better question we should ask.

There are a few, actually, and they’re tied to the very Lutheran question, “What does this mean?” Instead of “What does this text tell me God wants me to do?” we can ask, “What does this mean for how I understand God? What does this mean for how I respond to God’s mercy and grace? What does this mean for my life as I attempt to love God and love my neighbor as myself?”

When we ask these “What does this mean?” questions, we open ourselves to new possibilities for understanding the Word of God, and we have a good example of how those questions can help us in our Gospel reading for today.

We could very easily read this text and wonder what it’s asking us to do. It sounds like Jesus is telling us to practice hospitality, to welcome people. That Jesus is telling us that, if we welcome a prophet, we’ll receive a prophet’s reward; that, if we welcome a righteous person, we’ll receive the reward of the righteous.

And, certainly, hospitality and welcoming are great things to practice. In the church, they allow people to experience God’s grace and love in a community of believers, and they open us to the possibilities that come with welcoming someone new.

But we should be careful. Because it could also allow us to think, “If I do this thing, it will be pleasing to God and I will be rewarded,” which allows us to think, “If someone *doesn’t* do this thing, they may be punished or have God’s favor withdrawn.”

If we ask the “What does this text mean?” questions, we’re better able to put the text back into the context of the chapter. And then we see that these are part of Jesus’ words to the 12 as he prepares to send them out to share in his ministry.

Those words include being told that Jesus is sending them out as sheep among wolves, warning them that they wouldn’t be welcomed everywhere, and telling them that their relationship to Jesus is now the primary identifying aspect of their lives.

If those who welcome the 12 welcome Jesus, and those who welcome Jesus welcome God, then the 12 represent Jesus, which means they represent God. And therefore, who they were, how they acted, the seeds they sowed, would tell others about Jesus and about God.

As the followers of Jesus today, these words bring us into the mission of the 12 and all of Jesus’ followers throughout time.

So rather than being instructions, these are words of *promise*. They tell us that, “merely by offering ourselves up as the guest of *another* person’s welcome,” *they* can receive grace.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Which means these words of promise bear a challenge for us to offer a faithful message to those who welcome us. Who we are, how we act, the seeds we sow, tell others what we believe about Jesus and about God.

We are constantly communicating *something* about God to others. “Who we *are* preaches. Every word of grace we say has an impact, whether we see it or not.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

What we communicate matters. Because, as we see in our reading from Jeremiah, it’s not always easy for people to know who to believe when multiple people claim to speak for God, but offer different messages.

The difference in our Jeremiah story is that one person was telling the truth and one was telling the people what they wanted to hear.

It can be so tempting for us to soften our message, to make it more comfortable for others. And it can be hard for us to know who to believe when we hear competing messages about how to understand Scripture.

This is why we need to pay attention to the parts that make us uncomfortable, the parts that are hard, just as much as the parts that are comforting. Because the prophets didn’t usually go out and announce to the people that God said they were doing a good job, and should keep up the good work.

Instead, the prophets went out and said, “God loves you and will always love you, but you need to try harder. You need to remember what God said about caring for those who are oppressed, those who are forgotten. You need to be advocating for their well-being rather than seeking only your own comfort.”

Just as the 12 were sent, so too are we sent out to participate in God’s work in the world, and we have a responsibility to speak the truth to those who welcome us, and to listen when we welcome others. And knowing what the truth is can be hard.

We don’t have to look any further than the question about wearing masks in public to see that. From the start, we’ve had conflicting, changing information about whether to wear a mask in public. Since most of us aren’t trained in epidemiology, and those who *are* keep offering conflicting and changing information, we have trouble understanding who to believe. And the more politicized the issue becomes, the more it seems like our choices open us up to the sort of response the prophets received – derision, contempt, rejection.

Because we can’t always understand things well enough to make our own informed decision without having to rely on others, we can instead rely on our “what does it mean” questions. The questions, “What does this mean for how I understand God? What does this mean for how I respond to God’s mercy and grace? And what does this mean for my life as I attempt to love God and love my neighbor as myself?” don’t just apply to what we read in the Bible, but also to how we navigate the world around us, using our faith and our calling as our guide.

How we answer those questions tells people how we understand God and how we understand God’s hopes for all of creation.

What we say and what we do, who we are *preaches*. May our preaching be full of the grace and mercy that we have received in abundance from the God who loves us more than we can possibly comprehend.

1. *Dear Working Preacher* by Rolf Jaocbson, workingpreacher.org, accessed 6/24/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bp. Guy Erwin [↑](#footnote-ref-2)