

A Progressive Mission: Affirming the Light in Others
Matthew 10:40-42

Our Gospel reading for today is a series of 3 short verses, but these 3 verses are actually part of a larger section in Matthew's Gospel called the Missionary Discourse. Beginning in chapter 10, Jesus summons his disciples and tells them to go out as missionaries proclaiming the good news to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Jesus tells them to take no money, to take no sandals, and not even a staff to ward off wild animals. The missionaries will be sheep among wolves. They might be flogged in the synagogues and dragged before Roman Governors. He tells them if they're persecuted in one village to just keep on their way to the next village. Their good news might even rip apart families, making children enemies of their parents. I'm a firm believer that good news doesn't usually tear families apart. What are we to make of this good news?

Matthew's Gospel was written around 85 C.E., more than 50 years after Jesus was executed. The Jerusalem Temple, the social, cultural, and religious center of ancient Israelite daily life, has already been demolished by the Romans. The destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. caused trauma and chaos for all Jews. This is why they were lost sheep. All their hopes for liberation from Roman rule came crashing down on them. Probably the greatest symbol of who they were as a people was destroyed. In midst of all the confusion, rival factions, including the Pharisees and the Jesus movement, represented by Matthew's community, began competing and fighting one another for the chance to lead Jewish life in a new direction. Matthew's community was kicked out of the local synagogues. They were persecuted for their beliefs about Jesus, by other Jews and by the Roman Empire. Historians question the extent of such persecution and it certainly doesn't compare with Christian persecution of Jews over the past 2,000 years, but we can at least conclude that the suffering Matthew's community endured was experienced and real, no matter how sporadic it might have been.

It's in this context that missionaries from Matthew's community were sent to spread good news and hope to Jewish villages. Matthew portrays Jesus as telling missionaries not to worry about opposition but to expect it. Partisanship was in the air at the time. Mothers and Fathers might have been advocating for the Pharisees while their children joined Matthew's community, the Jesus Movement. People were torn and divided over their futures, like today where we can see traces of such division in our political system. We see it around the world in Kenya, Darfur, and many other places.

But it's important for us to see that Matthew is trying to encourage his community and give them hope. It may be that missionaries from Matthew's community are not aiming to convert people from one religion to another, but rather Matthew is suggesting that in a Post-Temple Period, a Matthean type of Christian Judaism is the best way to carry on the Jewish Tradition. That's why missionaries are being sent. Matthew's community felt like its message was an inspiring one. In the midst of occupying Roman Forces, it was a message that symbolized hope for a restored Israel. Matthew's intentions are noble, but his missionary discourse passage has had a profound and terrifying impact on the world. How many wars have been waged in the last 2000 years because one party thought its message of hope and faith was what the rest of the world needed?

In the 15th and 16th centuries, when the discovery and colonization of the New World began, the Spanish Monarchy, a Catholic Christian Monarchy, sent out missionaries with explorers to advance its message of Christianity. This message was used to justify the conquest of the Americas. The prevailing thought of the day went along like this: since the Christian God had property rights over every soul, then rightful ownership belongs to God. Since the Spanish Monarchy was a Christian one, it had a right and a duty to bring every native soul into right order and relationship with God. The impact on the natives resulted in forced conversions to Christianity or death.

Matthew may not have intended his message to be used in such a way but it was and still is. But I believe as progressive believers we can extract some good from our Gospel lesson today. In verse 40 we read, "Whoever accepts you, accepts me. Whoever accepts me, accepts the One who sent me." Matthew is asking people to be open to Jesus' message of hope, to try on the message before dismissing it. He's asking people to welcome missionaries into their homes, to welcome them for who they are as messengers of God, as people who incarnate God.

In 2002, I led a mission's team to the City of San Francisco. Most of us on the team thought of ourselves as fervent believers in the life-changing power of Jesus Christ. We were excited, young, and bold and we knew what we believed. We were in San Francisco to learn about urban ministry and to do urban ministry ourselves. I was there to save souls for Christ. I wanted to bring Christ to the City of San Francisco. As we explored the city, all I could think to myself was how lost the people were, how there was a big void in everyone's life, how people lacked and needed God in their lives. I wanted to help people because they lacked God. And so, I prayed in shelters, served in soup kitchens, and talked to people on the streets of the Tenderloin District trying to get everyone "saved." Then, one morning I was in a soup kitchen talking to young guy (late teens) named David. I asked him to tell me his story. David told me how he just got out of jail. He was caught with drugs yet again, and this time the judge wasn't so lenient. He was sentenced to a month in jail. But after he got out, he tried to go back home, but his parents were fed up with him and told him he couldn't live there anymore. David had no other options but to fend for himself on the streets living in shelters and eating in soup kitchens day to day. As he was telling me this, I thought wow...here is someone who needs God in his life. If there is anyone who lacks God, it's this guy here. But then David continued telling his story and he told me how while incarcerated, he got to read the Bible and pray a lot. He told me how he felt God was encouraging him in his life and how much he felt God loved him, no matter what he did. He said to me, "You know Mike...I can't tell you how many conversations I had with people about God while in jail. Even now while I'm homeless, I get to minister to people and talk to people about faith. Many wouldn't think I'm a faith-filled person, but I am."

And then David said something that changed my life forever. He said, "Let me tell you something Mike. I appreciate what you and your friends are doing by helping us out and serving food and praying for people. But don't help us out because you think we need God or we lack God. Help us out because you see God in us." And there I sat across from David shocked and amazed. I realized in that moment that I, the missionary and evangelist, had become the evangelized. In my years of being a Christian before then, I always thought of myself as doing everyone else a favor by introducing them to what they lacked and what they needed – God. I never viewed people as already containing the Divine within them.

This is what we can take from our Scriptures today: we are to welcome all people simply because when we welcome them, we welcome the Divine evident within them. We are to tolerate and welcome everyone as a good person and a messenger of God, whoever they may be – Muslims, Atheists, Agnostics, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, glbt folk, immigrants, non-Americans, even the worker at Starbucks who can never get your coffee order right, even musical directors named Todd who always like to step on and dirty my new, clean white tennis shoes, even pastors who love to give the pastoral intern a hard time, and even the church people who always ask me what part of India I'm from (I'm Mexican!). We welcome everyone as good and messengers of God because of the good and Divine within them. And when we give a cup of water to the thirsty, the marginalized, the oppressed, and those whom society deems as outcasts, we do so not because they lack God, but because they have God.

And when we preach our good news here at Sunshine Cathedral, when we share our light with the world, our goal isn't to proselytize or convert anyone. Our goal is to affirm the greatness in everyone. We share our light while acknowledging the light of others. All of us are on a path toward greatness. God is calling on us to unleash our potential in the world. God is calling us toward a richer and fuller and more loving life, but we must realize that there isn't one way to live lovingly or richly. God works with all of us in different ways. God loves us all but we all experience that love differently. Our paths toward greatness do and will take on different trajectories, but just as our way to God is true for us so are the ways of others true for them, just like Matthew, just like Jesus, and just like that young man David in San Francisco. Thank God. This is truly good news. Amen.