First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

June 18, 2023

An Overwhelming Need

Matthew 9:35-10:8

**35**Then 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. **36**When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. **37**Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; **38**therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

**10**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. **2**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; **3**Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus; **4**Simon the Cananaean and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. **5**These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not take a road leading to gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, **6**but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. **7**As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’**8**Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

So, I’m a true news junkie. I’m one of those mildly disturbed people who have several news apps on my phone and when you come into my house, more than likely you’ll find the TV on and tuned to either the local news or one of the cable news channels. I’ll leave it to y’all to figure out what my favorite cable news outlet is, based on what y’all know about me.

That said, I strongly believe that Jesus came to disrupt, and reform, the religious landscape of his day and that we, as followers of Christ Jesus, are called to do the same in our own time. And yes, that can be seen as being political, especially when the church becomes complicit in perpetuating oppression.

One of the challenges I face, as a preacher, is to preach the Gospel in such a way that honors my own understanding of what God is trying to say, while at the same time not going so far to the left or to the right that you shut down and stop listening. I like to think that, for the most part, I’ve been successful in walking that line, and I guess you could say that I subscribe to the Mary Poppins theory of preaching in that a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down in a most delightful way.

I imagine that some of you are wondering what the heck this has to do with the Gospel reading today. Well, I’ll invite you to hang in there with me for a bit longer, and I’ll do my best to connect the dots.

In today’s reading, we hear about Jesus traveling around, preaching, teaching and healing wherever he goes. We see that Jesus, having compassion on the crowds, tells his disciples to ask the Lord of the harvest to send more laborers, because the harvest is plentiful, but there aren’t enough workers. Then, as we read in chapter 10, verse 1, …*Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.*

This entire passage is very familiar to many of us, of course, and the traditional interpretation runs along the lines of the disciples being called to proclaim the Good News to the lost sheep of Israel. As some of you might have guessed, by now, I have a slightly different take on it.

The assumption the writer of Matthew’s Gospel makes here, is that the laborers; those both currently involved in the harvest, as well as the ones who join the effort at a later time, have the full support of the community. Or, to put it another way, we’re all in this together, so we’ll work hand in hand and do everything we can to spread the Good News of the Gospel.

It’s certainly valid to assume that the overwhelming need for people to spread the good news is going to trump any differences, but what happens when that’s not the case?

This week, my news feeds and my social media accounts were blowing up with the news that the Southern Baptist Convention voted at their annual meeting to completely ban women from being Pastors in their tradition. They went on to disfellowship, read kicked out, five congregations including Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church which, with 41,000 members, is the largest Southern Baptist Church in the country. They took this action simply because these five churches have female clergy. I was saddened, but not shocked or surprised, by this move as the SBC has been moving in this direction for decades.

Before I go on, let me be clear; It’s very rare that I feel the need to publicly criticize the internal deliberations and policies of another iteration of the Christian Church. I’m making an exception today, because in a world that is in desperate need of the salvation that the message of peace, love, hope and joy offered by Jesus, this move seems to run counter to everything that Jesus preached about. Think about this, for a moment. If it weren’t for women preachers, we would have no knowledge of the resurrection.

This move also seems, to me at least, to be a self-inflicted wound, as it was reported that in the last year, the SBC has lost 500,000 members, and that’s a whole lot of laborers no longer working the harvest. Now, some of those folks who left the SBC are working in other areas of the vineyard, to be sure. However, I can say, with some certainty, that many of those folks who left, have more than likely given up on religion entirely.

Before we Presbyterians get too smug about what happened this week, let me remind you that it took our own denomination 200 years before we allowed women to be ordained as ministers and there are *still* Presbyterian churches within our own church who engage in theological gymnastics in order to avoid calling a women to serve as their spiritual leader. We still have plenty of work to do in our own corner of the vineyard, y’all.

So, the obvious question is why? Why would a denomination that has been rocked by a massive sexual abuse scandal and is hemorrhaging members at an unprecedented rate; why would they exclude some who are in a position to teach and encourage others how to be laborers for the Lord? The answer lies, in my opinion, in a misinterpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11-12, which reads*, “11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.”*

Once again, we need to look at the context of what appears on the surface to be a total prohibition on women preachers. Paul is instructing Timothy regarding the church in Ephesus, which is being plagued by false teachers, working through women in the congregation. Patrick Franklin, an Associate Professor of Theology & Ethics at Providence Theological Seminary in Manitoba, Canada, writes that, *“The women in Ephesus were being banned from teaching and leadership not because they were women, but because they were not ready, not adequately trained for the job. And given their status (used to being people of influence) and values (it is important to be rich and to appear affluent), it seems that they lacked both knowledge of the Christian faith and the humility and self-awareness to recognize their lack. Many of these high-status women probably had male slaves/servants who were now worshipping with them in the Christian church. The kind of ‘authority’ they were used to exercising over them was no longer fitting in the context of Christian worship and community.”*

Here, as Professor Franklin makes clear, writings attributed to Paul have been applied to the universal church when, in reality, Paul was addressing a specific issue within a specific congregation. Context matters, folks.

I realize I’m preaching to a congregation that has consistently and boldly affirmed God’s call to women in ministry for many, many years. And I’ll add my own wholehearted and unequivocal affirmation to yours. I’ve been told that this congregation was the first one in our Presbytery to ordain women as deacons and elders, even before the ban on such ordinations was lifted. I give thanks to God for your continued courage, vision and leadership in choosing to following the voice of the Holy Spirit. I’ll also note that I stand here as the first male pastor to serve this congregation in thirty-five years, and if it had not been for the women deacons, elders and pastors in my own life, who encouraged and nurtured my own call to ministry, I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t be standing here today.

So, where does all of this leave us? In a world where many people who claim to follow Christ Jesus, weaponize scripture to exclude those who they don’t like, or agree with, we have an opportunity to walk a different path. We have an opportunity to consistently and boldly affirm God’s call not just to women, but to whomever God chooses to call.

There is an overwhelming need for the message of peace, love, hope and joy that the teaching of Jesus offers the world. Why would we turn away anyone who is willing to help spread that Good News?

Your assignment, this week, is to exercise your God given gift to heal the disease and sickness of division and exclusion. Resist the temptation to use scripture as a weapon against another child of God. And if such a temptation arises, take a breath, step back, and think about what Jesus would do in the situation. Go and look at the context of whatever passage you’re planning on using to justify shamming or excluding someone else. The world’s need of the good news of the Gospels is far too great to indulge in the foolishness of division or exclusion. AMEN