

Hard Sayings of Jesus:

“Shake Off the Dust”- August 11, 2019

I've been dealing with job descriptions lately. We just had staff evaluations, so I was meeting with staff to match how they are doing with what we have asked them to do- lots of good comments all around. Linda and Sierra do their jobs so well. I was evaluated by three of our members and by our council president. We didn't do this, but one of the ways to evaluate a pastor is to have people list the top five things they think their pastor ought to be doing. That's an interesting exercise, because any group of five people will have different priorities on the list.

So if I were to have you rank the top five things from this list you'd want me to be about, I wonder what would be in your top five: preacher, teacher, priest, prophet, pastoral caregiver, administrator, cheerleader, ambassador, blessed presence, midwife for life passages, ritual maker, keeper of the story, CEO, activities director, “one of us,” corporate therapist, or something else? The constitution tells me my job description as well. Two of the top five I'm supposed to be about are preaching and teaching and making sure the needs of the poor are advocated for.

This Tuesday and Wednesday evening we're interviewing five candidates for our church music position, and we have a job description we want to see if they can fulfill. Please be praying we'll be led to the right person.

Jesus hands out a job description to his disciples in today's reading from Matthew's gospel. He can only do so much; he can only minister to so many people. So he wants to expand the ministry God has given him. A couple of years ago we called Sierra to work with our youth; we needed to expand the ministry. We gave her a job description. We're so blessed to have her.

Jesus says, There are more people who need to be released from their bondage; there are more people who need to hear about forgiveness and new life; there are more people who need healing. So he sends out his disciples with a job description: he tells them where to go, where not to go, what to say, what to do, what the salary is, what to bring, and what not to bring. He tells them they'll need to make some decisions about where to stay and where not to stay.

Here's what he says to his twelve disciples: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of

Israel.” And we say, Stop right there. Didn’t Jesus want everybody to hear the good news? What do you mean only go to the Jewish people?

Well, in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus’ perception of his mission was that it was to the people of Israel. A Gentile woman comes up to him several chapters after this and wants him to cast the demon out of her daughter, and he says, “I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” She has to talk him into caring for her daughter (we will have that story in a couple weeks).

But at the end of Matthew, before he ascends into heaven, he says to his disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of *all nations*...” So yes, everybody will be invited to share in the good news. (Matthew 28:19). Paul says in his Letter to the Romans that *the good news of Jesus is for the Jew first, and also all for the Greek (Romans 1:17)*.

So Jesus says, These are my orders from God: we’re starting with the house of Israel, with those folks on our doorstep. The nations will come later.

Then he tells them what to say and what to do: “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ This is what Jesus had been preaching. This is the first thing he says in Matthew chapter 4, verse 17, when he begins his ministry in Galilee: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

What does it mean for the kingdom to come near? What does that look like? It looks like acts of compassion and acts of healing and acts of liberation from bondage. Jesus says, ‘Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.’ Why are there signs connected to the proclamation? Because the words are corroborated by the signs. The actions of Jesus display what the words are saying.

When some disciples of John the Baptist come to see Jesus, they ask, Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for somebody else? Do you remember what Jesus says? “Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the poor have good news brought to them.” In other words, What do you think? Take a look at what’s happening! Who I am is shown by the things I do. You can tell your spouse you love them, but you back that up with your actions. You can tell your parents you love them, but you show that in how you treat them. You show your friends you care by your actions.

We can tell people in the community all we want that we love them, but when we help them show up this fall with a backpack of new school supplies, that proves the love. We can tell a couple of kids sleeping on the floor that we love them, but when we put them in a bunk bed it's proof of that love. Jesus says, Proclaim the good news, and then act it out. People are looking for authenticity. Don't tell me what you believe, show me.

Our ELCA church-wide assembly took place in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, this past week, and on Wednesday, hundreds of the delegates went down to the ICE headquarters in downtown Milwaukee. They took a page from Martin Luther in 1517, and posted nine theses on the door. Here is what the first one said:

“When our Lord Jesus Christ said repent, he willed the entire life of believers to be repentance. We repent of our silence, indifference, and our lack of courage, as our nation separates immigrant families, inflicts misery on migrant children and turns away refugees.”

I know we have various opinions in this sanctuary about what is going on at our southern border, but I can't argue about what Scripture says: Scripture is clear about caring for the alien and welcoming the stranger and providing compassion for the beat-up man on the side of the road. So if we say we are following Jesus, what does that look like on our southern border? What policies do we support? How do we show our neighbor our love in action? Jesus says to his disciples, Proclaim the kingdom of God, and then he says, Here's what it looks like.

Earlier I reminded you what he said to the disciples of John the Baptist: The poor have good news brought to them... What does that look like for asylum seekers who are supposed to have due process according to our laws? I'm not saying we shouldn't have a border. I'm not saying we let everybody in. I'm not saying get rid of ICE. I just believe that Jesus in disguise is meeting us at the border, and it feels to me that we are finding too many ways to say no to our neighbor in need. We are too often walking by on the other side. Jesus says to his disciples, and he says to us: Tell people the reign of God is near, and then show them what it looks like.

But the job description of the disciples goes on. Jesus says, Let's talk about wages. You won't receive any. I gave you gifts; I equipped you for service, and you got it for free; give it out for free. And I want you to go out trusting you will get what you need along the way: “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.” That means, you'll be fed along the way.

Now, later on in the New Testament, Paul says, Be sure those who are called to be leaders among you are taken care of financially. But here Jesus says, I want you to trust that you'll get what you need. (see 1 Corinthians 9:9-14)

I can't tell you how many times in Susan's and my life, especially in our earlier years, an unexpected expense came along; an emergency situation happened with the car, or something else, we didn't know where the money would come from, and some funds came our way out of the blue. We've seen this happen with our kids. Jesus says to these disciples, Go out trusting that you will get what you need along the way.

Now, this list of what not to bring runs counter to the list in Mark, by the way. Jesus in Mark says they can bring a staff, and they can wear sandals. Mathew might have been saying to his community that disciples ought to look different from regular travelers, who would have a staff and sandals. It really would be trusting not to wear sandals, wouldn't it?

And then Jesus says this: I expect people in these towns you visit to take care of you, but not everyone will. "Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave." In other words, at the entrance to the town, ask where someone has the means and the openness to host you.

"As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy (meaning if they are hospitable to you) let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy (meaning if they are not receptive), let your peace return to you." A greeting in this culture was seen as a physical presence.

And then this statement: "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, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town." Those are the words that put this on my list of the hard sayings of Jesus.

What does it mean to shake the dust off your feet as you leave the house or the town? There was a Jewish custom that when someone had travelled to a foreign country, when they arrived back in Israel they were to shake the dust off their feet, because they didn't want to bring anything unholy into the Holy Land. Jesus is using this imagery. And it certainly would have made a visual impact to have somebody take off their sandals and wipe their feet after they left your doorstep. I

suppose it would be sort of like wiping your hands of a situation. These folks are not ready to hear this news.

Have you ever had to move on from a situation? Did you have a ritual for it? I've burned some things in a ritual way when I needed to move on from them. Rituals can be helpful. Jesus says, You need to make a decision whether or not your time is useful here. Wow, that's a tough one, isn't it? How do we know when to move along? How do we know when our work is done? How do we know when God seems to be calling us into a new chapter? That takes prayer; that takes discernment; that takes conversation with others. Remember, he sends them out two by two. Maybe they had a huddle at the doorstep and said, What do you think? Move on?

Jesus' words after this are harsh. He says, "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." Sodom and Gomorrah are mentioned in Genesis as being wicked places that God destroyed. In our first reading today, God visits Abraham and Sarah and tells them they will bear a son in their old age, and then God moves on to Sodom to destroy a wicked place. Abraham begs him to not to do it, because his nephew Lot and his family live there.

When the heavenly visitors stay at Lot's house in Sodom, the men of the town gather around the house because they want to know the men, which means to have sexual relations with them. It's one of the passages used by Christians to say that homosexual relations are wrong. But this really is a case of gang rape. Of course God is against that. So why does Jesus bring up Sodom and Gomorrah here? Because he is talking about the lack of hospitality shown to the disciples. Sodom and Gomorrah were condemned *for their inhospitality*. The prophet Ezekiel later lists the sins of Sodom, and says this: "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy." (Ezekiel 16:49) The people of Sodom were inhospitable to the heavenly visitors, and they were inhospitable to the poor in their midst. They brought judgment upon themselves.

Jesus talks about the Day of Judgment here. In this same Gospel, in Matthew 25, Matthew describes Jesus judging the nations, and he separates people according to how they treated those who struggled: how did you treat the stranger, the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned? And according to that measure, some go to the right, and

some go to the left. The sheep inherit the kingdom; the goats are off to eternal punishment.

But even in that judgment, with some going off to eternal punishment, the phrase for eternal does not mean forever and ever, but it means *for a given time*. And the kind of punishment is *restorative* punishment. That means punishment that rehabilitates. That means at some point you might rejoin the community. I believe that, yes, there will be judgment. There has to be. God will take care of that. But I believe that God will also someday bring everything together in love. As the mystic Hildegard of Bingen once said, “But all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” (see also God’s plan in Ephesians 1:10-11)

Meanwhile, we have a job description: We go out in our daily lives to share the news, The kingdom of God has come near in Jesus. We will show the kingdom of God in works of love and justice. And we’ll leave the results up to God. Amen.