

I admit that when I read the lessons for this morning, I laughed out loud. The harvest is indeed plentiful, and the laborers must stay home or wear masks and keep their distance.

In our Gospel passage from Matthew, we learn that the church has six primary tasks: going, proclaiming the Good News, curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers and casting out demons. From the very beginning, Jesus himself does these things, finding himself facing crowds in desperate need, and he calls us to join him in his work.

We are to proclaim the Good News that the kingdom has come near. We are to help all of God's children see and understand that God's unmerited grace is available to all of us, whatever our circumstances may be. It is never too late to turn to God, make space for the Holy to move in and through us, and set about the work of building God's kingdom in the here and now.

We are to cure the sick. Right now, in this pandemic, this looks like patiently waiting for the medical community to do their jobs ~ caring for those who succumb to the virus as well as developing a vaccine to fortify our resistance to Covid19. It means remaining intentional about preventing the spread of the virus so that those who are most susceptible are sheltered from greater risk.

Also, we must remember that not all sickness is physical. There are sicknesses of the mind and heart that we are called to cure as well. More on that in a moment.

We are to raise the dead. We are to be a witness to the power of God's redemptive love in the world ~ to be a beacon of light and hope to those who have lost their way. In-fighting, being deliberately provocative to those of differing faith expressions, and advocating a self-centered "me-and-mine" attitude does not reflect the glory of our resurrected Christ. We raise the dead by serving the Christ in those who are more vulnerable, less privileged, more in need than we are.

We are to cleanse the lepers. The lepers of our day are all around us, invisible to most of us, and will (as Jesus mentions in the beatitudes) inherit the kingdom of God. We are to actively seek out and minister to those on the margins, who are treated as less-than, and whose personhood has been diminished.

We are to cast out demons ~ the demons of hate, fear, cruelty, injustice, stigma, prejudice, and oppression, to name just a few. These demons have no place in God's created order.

But first, Jesus says, we must go. Throughout this passage, it feels as though we are constantly on the move, just as the Church is called to be, as it lives out its mission. Jesus doesn't tell his followers to establish churches in fixed locations and gather there regularly in order to "do" church at an appointed time each week. Rather, he "*sends*" them, and he repeatedly tells them to **go** and **be** the church at all times and in all places.

It's clear that the church is to *be in motion*: not dwelling in a static, stay-at-home, preserve-our-level-of-comfort-and-let-them-come-to-us spirituality. We are to embark on a bold "going-out" into this world that God loves so passionately, sharing what God has given us with those who have not yet heard God speaking to them, or do not feel the touch of God's love upon their lives.

Matthew reminds us once again that Jesus didn't sit still but traveled about, curing and teaching and healing, and when he saw the hunger and need and confusion of the crowds, he felt that profound compassion for them. "Jesus both *moved* and *was moved*."¹

Yes, right now one of the best ways we love our neighbors is by continuing to shelter in place and being mindful in how we engage the community outside our homes. And yes, we are called to advocate for a just society that is free from systematic oppression and discrimination. Faithfully caring for the vulnerable among us will mean different things to each of us. We can both respect the guidelines for minimizing the spread of Covid-19 **and** protest the horrific reality of racism. It is not an either/or, but a both/and. If our core motivation is to proclaim the Good News, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleans the lepers and cast out demons, how I faithfully try do that and how you faithfully try do that may be different, and that's okay.

Like Jesus, we too are called to be attuned to the needs of the world, its hunger and confusion. We're called to act with compassion and to approach that hurt with tender care. We are called not to sit still but, like Jesus, to be both moved and on the move, open and responsive to those we meet along the way.

Yes, of course, it's important that we regularly come together for many reasons: for worship, primarily, but also for learning and for community. That same structure that houses our worship is perfectly-suited to organizing and hosting ministries of justice and compassion and outreach ~ reaching out beyond our walls, beyond our own social, political, and ideological circles ~ suffering with and loving those whose circumstances are beyond our own lived experiences.

We celebrate so many joyous occasions in our churches, and mourn together when tragedy strikes or threatens to overwhelm us. No wonder we think of these beloved buildings, these wonderful gatherings, as our "church home," our safe space to rest, regroup and be renewed.

We are still worshipping together, albeit in a modified way; teaching is being done; the Good News is being shared. Front-line workers every single day are performing amazing works of healing and tender care; their efforts are ministry, too. Our food ministries and justice efforts continue, with amazing generosity and the support of this congregation. And various forms of fellowship are happening, too, thanks to technology.

Last week, I stumbled on a piece written by Anne Lamott² who shared her thoughts on the strife and sorrow following the death of George Floyd ~ in the midst of our social isolation, and the demonstrations and violence that have erupted.

She begins: "I wish I had my Sunday School kids today, during the devastation of the pandemic and the terrifying images of murder and protest. I would tell that I am lost, too, but from the wise old pinnacle of my years, I would assure them that we can **trust God**, no matter how things look

¹ Kate Huey

² Posted May 31, 2020:

[https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott/posts/2785841841545441?_xts__\[0\]=68.ARAPyXsUb56ZLZE9vPdWHD7jogQzaFi8DEXf97mrn3yaYMM3TIpWzCkFypxN-UdbY1JSOKqvPzM77-L6sAdbNGmTtn60a4DPIBhAF22cpYe1hH0JJhPh3ZANckRDJvwdMIYU8aKQHDVoTIKzRmMP2LnRh_PcSII8zCuUZyjpzRD_ic4kCM3io1Qh3hRbriSO_tWp5gGXmL4d9EruFhBVFBM8_aA9JV5ERKBYyRraBGxtgxOKyUaiN7eMRB3gwtPKVMjRN5ofBcaZEImFLZhuPyvmyHTj1sD28gUWgkqu653xg3dQnVmCgcu93gB3B_vCbAS4n6Hh9YyT_udk42dg&_tn_=-R](https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott/posts/2785841841545441?_xts__[0]=68.ARAPyXsUb56ZLZE9vPdWHD7jogQzaFi8DEXf97mrn3yaYMM3TIpWzCkFypxN-UdbY1JSOKqvPzM77-L6sAdbNGmTtn60a4DPIBhAF22cpYe1hH0JJhPh3ZANckRDJvwdMIYU8aKQHDVoTIKzRmMP2LnRh_PcSII8zCuUZyjpzRD_ic4kCM3io1Qh3hRbriSO_tWp5gGXmL4d9EruFhBVFBM8_aA9JV5ERKBYyRraBGxtgxOKyUaiN7eMRB3gwtPKVMjRN5ofBcaZEImFLZhuPyvmyHTj1sD28gUWgkqu653xg3dQnVmCgcu93gB3B_vCbAS4n6Hh9YyT_udk42dg&_tn_=-R)

and how long things take.” She continues, "the pain inside us and right in front of us is nothing compared to the power of love that surrounds us.”

We know this power of love that surrounds us, because what we’re dealing with is nothing new. We remember our ancestors in faith who certainly continued to be the faithful people of God in the most isolating of circumstances: through plague, pandemic, war, persecution, and natural disasters. Even the most cursory reading of the Scriptures reminds us that the headlines that fill our news feeds are not novel in the unfolding drama of God’s sacred story.

Several weeks ago, the Bishop-elect of the Diocese of Missouri, Deon Johnson, reflected on the declaration that the Church is essential, and he put it this way: “[of course] the work of the church is essential. The work of caring for the lonely, the marginalized, and the oppressed is essential. The work of speaking truth to power and seeking justice is essential. The work of being a loving, liberating, and life-giving presence in the world is essential. The work of welcoming the stranger, the refugee and the undocumented is essential. The work of reconciliation and healing and caring is essential.”³

Matthew’s use of the image of "sheep without a shepherd" calls us to reach out to those who are harassed and helpless, to see all of God's children as sacred human beings: precious and loved and deserving of our attention, energy, resources, and care. However, the tender image of sheep without a shepherd more properly, and more poignantly, speaks of a world that is looking to the us, to people of faith, with questions and doubts and real, human needs.

Back in 1997, one of my colleagues wrote, "Any notion that the church ought to quit getting involved in non-spiritual matters and get back to its 'real job' of preaching the gospel and saving souls misses the point. 'Preaching the gospel and saving souls' means grappling with disease and the demonic, with social segregation and the powers of death. It means, therefore, wrestling with issues of public health care, with racial and social alienation, with the powers of domination and oppression that bleed the life out of [our communities]."⁴

Presiding Bishop Curry recently said, “If I make room for you, and you make room for me, and if we will work together to create a society where there is room for all of God's children, where every human being, every one of us is treated as a child of God, created in the image and likeness of God, where everybody is loved, everybody is honored, everybody is respected, everybody is treated as a child of God. If we work together to build that kind of society and don't give up, then love can save us all ... The old spiritual says it this way. If you cannot preach like Peter and you cannot pray like Paul, just tell the love of Jesus how he died to save us all. There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.”⁵

Jesus sent out his disciples with the following instructions: ‘Go. Go to the lost sheep of my flock. As you go, proclaim the good news, that ‘the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.’

³ <http://stlukeseasthampton.org/welcome-to-st-lukes/is-the-church-essential>

⁴ Thom Long in *Matthew: Westminster Bible Commentary*, 1997.

⁵ <https://episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-michael-currys-pentecost-sermon-live-streamed-service>