

Matthew 9:35-10:20

Pentecost 2 + Proper 6A + June 18, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Authority

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 10:7-8: Jesus said to the twelve, "Proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Just imagine the scene in some dusty village where nothing ever happens. Two ordinary-looking men arrive. They stay awhile to talk. It's not just any talk. They tell sick people to be healthy, and the sick people become healthy people. They tell dead people to live, and the dead are alive again. They tell lepers to be cleansed, and the lepers aren't leprous anymore. When confronted by a raving, demon-possessed man, they tell the demon to go away – and it does!

Not only that, but it's free. They don't ask for anything: no gold or silver or even copper, not even a new shoulder bag or a spare pair of sandals. When they're served the same meal as everybody else, they don't wrinkle their noses and ask if there's something better.

They could, you know: if they charged families a king's ransom for an exorcism or a resurrection, no one would bat an eye. But while they accept gifts of food and lodging, they never put a price on what they do. Why? Because they don't take credit for the power: they have come as representatives of Jesus. He is the One with all the power and authority, and He has given them His authority to exercise power on His behalf. He has told them to give health and life freely, because they have been freely given to.

What have they been given? They tell the people: They've been brought into the kingdom of heaven, because the King of heaven has come. It's for their hearers too! In heaven, there is no leprosy or death or demon-possession: if you're going to be in the kingdom of heaven, you can't have things like that hanging around your neck. You can't have any sin or corruption about you at all. But rather than say, "You can't come in," the King takes on flesh and says, "I'll take those things away so that you *can* come into My kingdom."

And even if the King Himself isn't standing in this dusty little village, His *sent-ones* – His apostles – say His words, and the effect is the same as if He were there in the flesh.

There's one more astonishing part to what these men declare: many don't want to hear it. At times when these men arrive at a village or a home, people do not receive them. They announce that they have come to give peace from the King, and the people do not want the King's peace. When this happens, the apostles just walk away: they coerce no one. How tragic it will be for such on the Last Day they see what they have rejected. The King has gone so far as to die in their place in order to deliver them from sin and death and devil; instead, they opt for an eternity with sin, death and devil rather than the King.

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Given our Gospel lesson, here's an important question: what does Jesus "send" *us* to do? In other words, what authority does He give to us today? See, some will say that if Jesus sent the apostles to heal the sick and cast out demons, then He sends out every Christian to do the same. But that's bad theology. If that rationale is true, then so is this one: God commanded

another of His messengers, the prophet Isaiah, to spend three years walking around a city naked (Is 20), so you'd better ... go and do likewise.

Please don't. The Lord gives different tasks and authority to different people. So the question is, "What has Jesus given us authority to do?"

Jesus has given us authority to spread the news that the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. It *is* at hand because the King is at hand, for Jesus is in His means of grace. As we speak His Word, it is Jesus who speaks. As we baptize, it is Jesus who baptizes. As we celebrate the Lord's Supper, well, it is the *Lord's* Supper, is it not? He is the host and He is the meal, His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.

We have His authority to say that the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. We also have the authority to say that the gates of the kingdom are open to all who believe, because Jesus has died for the sins of all – and because He is risen from the dead. To all who repent of their sins, we are authorized to say, "The kingdom of heaven is open to you!" To all who do not repent of their sin, we are authorized to say, "There's no sin in the kingdom of heaven, so the gates are closed to you until that sin is gone. Repent! Be rid of your sin so that you can come in!"

This is the authority that Jesus has given to His people – and this authority is most publicly exercised by pastors, yes? But while pastors carry on the apostolic ministry, it does not mean that they have the same authorization as the apostles *in Matthew 10*. As a pastor, am I authorized to go only to the lost sheep of Israel, as the apostles were? No, Jesus has authorized His Church and His pastors to "disciple-ize" all nations, as we heard last week.

As a pastor, am I authorized to heal the sick, raise the dead or cleanse lepers on the spot? No. While Jesus gave that authority to the Twelve in Matthew 10, He doesn't give that to His Church or His pastors today. We should be very clear about a couple of points here. First of all, can God still work miracles of healing today? Absolutely, and He does. But He doesn't authorize pastors to do the healing. When someone is sick, I am authorized to speak God's Word to them and to pray for them. Where God chooses to work a miracle, thanks be to God – for it is He who does the wonder. Where He provides healing gradually (or doesn't), we trust in Him and look forward to being healed in eternity. The point here is that I'm not authorized to lay hands on the sick with a guarantee of healing them. If I make such a guarantee, I am no longer acting under Jesus' authority. If you expect or demand that I lay hands on the sick and heal them, then you are asking me to act outside of the authority that Jesus has given ... and I'd best side with Jesus on that one.

So unlike the apostles I am not authorized to heal the sick, raise the dead or cleanse lepers. Next question: am I authorized to cast out demons? The answer is ... yes. In fact, we all spend a lot of time doing this. We are engaged in spiritual warfare, right? The devil is always tempting us to this or that sin, trying to gain a foothold to lure us away from Christ our King. So what do we do? We keep proclaiming that the King is not away, but at hand, remember? Christ has defeated the devil at the cross; if He is here and our sins are forgiven, then the devil and evil spirits must flee. They don't go very far – just beyond the light, hanging around the edge of darkness and waiting to attack again. That is why we constantly speak and hear God's Word, sing it and meditate upon it. As we wrestle against the principalities and powers of darkness, the Lord gives us one sword – His Word. Every absolution, every baptism, every Kyrie and Christian hymn, every profession of faith by new members sends demons scurrying for the cover of darkness.

That's the authority that Jesus gives to us: speak His Word, forgive the penitent and warn the impenitent, which is to engage in spiritual warfare by His grace and strength.

The next question, then: what can we expect? What can we expect as we go about what Jesus has given us authority to do?

First off, we expect to live as those redeemed. In the words of Jesus, "Freely you have received, freely give." The revenue model for a congregation reflects this: we set a budget with some big expenses, and then we don't charge anything. You give offerings freely out of thanksgiving for all that God has given you, not because you receive an invoice. We don't have a cover charge for worship. We don't sell sermons or sacraments (it's been done before), because it is the Lord who is doing the work and we are merely His instruments under His authority. Although I for my part am called to be content and deliver the means of grace to you freely, you are kind enough to heed Jesus' words that a laborer is worthy of wages and thus to provide for me and my family. For such kindness, I thank you and I give thanks to God for you.

What else can we expect? We can expect that some will gladly hear and rejoice to be forgiven for their sins and added to the kingdom of heaven; and as the angels rejoice with each repentant sinner, so should we. We can also expect that many will reject the peace of Jesus and even oppose the message we have to say. We walk in the steps and under the authority of Jesus, and the world put Him on a cross. The disciples served under the authority of Jesus, and nearly all of them were martyred.

We are currently enjoying times of plenty at Good Shepherd: we give thanks to God for the many new faces that He has added to our number here, for the opportunities to make repairs and improvements, and to support missionaries elsewhere. Our current abundance is not the norm in congregations today, and we should not be lulled into thinking that this is anything but the gracious provision of God. We should also be aware that abundance comes with a fair share of temptations to get us off track, and that the devil especially seeks to disrupt congregations where there is peace and harmony in Christ. Be on your guard.

God grant His mercy upon us so that we are constantly aware that we are sheep in the midst of wolves, and that we are only preserved because of Christ, the Good Shepherd, who has died for our sins, who is risen again, and who rules over all things for our good.

God further preserve us in this confidence during times of plenty and peace, as well as times of famine and trouble.

Finally, God grant that we be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. In other words, knowing that we face the opposition of the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh, we seek to act with wisdom. We do not pick needless fights, but we do speak and make our voice heard. And when we know that such speech and wisdom will cost us, we still go forward like an innocent, sacrificial dove, trusting that the Lord will give us the words to speak, deliver us from evil and trouble according to His will, and even raise us from the dead.

So the Lord Jesus promises to do, and He will keep His promises: remember, after all, that all authority has been given to Him. He rules over all things forever and for your good; and as you and I go about speaking His Word within our callings, we have the confidence that we have His blessing because we are under His authority. Where we are blessed, all thanks to Him. Where we suffer for His name's sake, we give thanks that His enemies see our faith and associate us with Him. And all the time, we rejoice to hear the King of heaven declare, "My kingdom is at hand, and you are among My children. Why? Because," says the King, "I have all authority, and I say to you that I forgive you all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen