

Second Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

In this week's text, from Matthew's gospel, we hear an invitation to both generosity and particularity. This reading — following the lengthy sermon on the mount, proclaiming the coming of the kingdom (3:1–7:29) — puts the discourses about the kingdom into action. Jesus commissions followers to go to towns with a message and power.

Matthew's gospel, so focused on proposing Jesus within a Jewish iconography, demonstrates this first coming of the kingdom being initially directed towards those within the Jewish narrative. We see this in the strict instructions to avoid Gentile and Samaritan towns. And so we may be left with tension or conflict when reading the particular focus of these instructions. As we'll see (courtesy of the 1981 Irish translation) there may be a take the log out of your own community's eye dynamic happening in this text that is less about exclusion of Gentiles and Samaritans and more about tending to your own house before proclaiming your virtue to your neighbours.

Text

Matthew 9:36–10:8

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

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. 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; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

Comment

The Irish translation of Matthew 9:37 (The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few) is “*Tá an fómhar fairsing ach níl ann ach meitheal bheag.*”

The word used for *Harvest* in this translation is *Meitheal*. It's an extraordinarily vivid word in the Irish lexicon, being less of a calendar event for when crops are ready to be harvested and more a description about a community process, where communities build relationship among themselves by coworking on each other's farms. Irish isn't unique for having a word — *meitheal* — that describes people sharing the burden of harvesting each other's land. In Norwegian, a similar process is described as *Dugnad*; in South Sudan, we hear of *Naffir*; among Swahili speaking populations the word *Harambe* is used; and in Serbia, the word *Moba* refers to a similar community activity. Each of these rich words speaks of service offered in the community to support someone in a time of need, death, change or harvest. This is always offered without charge. In certain cultures, while payment is never accepted, the kindness of neighbours is marked by the one who received help offering food or a fiesta. Even in this, we notice a deep dignity: the one who has been the recipient of help is not put into a situation of subservience. The one who has been the recipient of community generosity becomes the host of community generosity through hospitality as thanksgiving.

So with this lens, we can perhaps enter this week's text in the following way:

Jesus is seeing great need in the townlands round about him. He sees that the people — harassed and harangued — are in need of community, and sends the disciples out to offer gestures of kindness and hospitality. He tells his followers that he counts them among his own, and helps them realise what they can offer. And he sends them to their own, telling them to never make people feel like they are indebted, but to give from the very same generosity that gave to them.

What does this have to do with conflict?

There are a few applications.

Firstly, many of us can find it hard to receive. To be in the debt of another — even another's kindness — can be a complicated experience for many people. It is certainly part of some cultures to feel diminished if you are the recipient. However, even those among us who struggle to receive nonetheless can feel the joy of giving. None of us can give unless someone else is willing to receive, and so in this, we see the way that generosity is not only a task of the giver, but also something that requires the participation of the receiver. In order to move away from power dynamics that assume that one person will always be the donor and another person will always be the recipient, it seems that fluidity of giving/receiving is a spiritual discipline.

Secondly, we see that if people are used to a generosity of harvesting each other's lands then the everyday tensions and conflicts that arise between individuals happen within a landscape and practice of reciprocal support. Conflict is a part of life — without it, we might not have art, drama, news — but when we become locked in a narrative that only describes another through a lens of conflict we can become diminished. If, however, the experience of conflict also happens within a context of both giving and receiving thanks to/from the other, then conflict finds a more appropriate setting.

Perhaps we can sum up Jesus' anxiety from this week's gospel text in this way:

Jesus saw that people had no one to help. And he told the disciples — who had much to be thankful for — to be generous, and to not use their generosity as a way to be princely, but rather to see it as a practice of community, where everybody can sometimes help and sometimes be in need of help.

We do not imagine a world without conflicts. What we imagine is a world where conflicts can be held in the story of a community.

Response

In groups, or in pairs, share stories of times when it was difficult to receive the generosity of others, or when someone found it difficult to receive your generosity.

What does this experience tell us of the human condition?

Prayer

Generous Jesus
Yours is an economy of sharing;
one day being thankful for the help received;
another day going a extra mile
to gladly give.
May we, each day, have opportunities
to be generous in giving to others
and generous in our thanks to those who give to us,
knowing that
no-one should be tied solely to a story of debt.
Because you were loved by those
from whom nobody expected any good
and you loved them. Amen.