

Intrepid

Matthew 10:5-23

June 14, 2020

First Presbyterian, Luling

At the Presbytery meeting last weekend, Sallie Watson, our General Presbyter, told us all—ministers and elders alike—that we were “intrepid.” Now that’s not a word that gets thrown around a lot, so she defined it for us, courtesy of Merriam-Webster: “showing resolute fearlessness, fortitude and endurance.” Sallie said that, in the way we had all adapted to online worship in a matter of weeks if not days, in the ways we had figured out how to care for each other and reach out to our neighbors, we had been, and continue to be, intrepid.

Sallie didn’t mention this, but I’ve seen my colleagues and our sister Presbyterian churches be intrepid in recent weeks, in the way they’ve spoken out against racism, the way they’ve made public statements, the worship services of lament they have held. In comparison to some of them, I don’t feel very intrepid.

The word “intrepid” tickled something in the back of my brain, so I of course turned to Google to see if I could figure out what it was. It didn’t take long for me to find The Center for the Intrepid, at SAAMC, in San Antonio. It’s a center that treats burn victims and amputees. They provide amazing prosthetic and reconstructive technologies, as well as rehab, therapy, and psychological counseling. Those patients, I can enthusiastically agree, are intrepid. Again, in comparison, I don’t really feel intrepid myself. I could definitely qualify as stubborn, maybe even as persistent, but intrepid is more of a compliment than I feel ok about receiving.

To return to a church context, what would it look like to be intrepid Christians, intrepid disciples? Jesus’s sending out instructions to the disciples give us a pretty good picture of what an intrepid disciple needs to be like. And, to give you a preview, it’s more than a little bit tricky, but there’s some encouragement too.

Just before we started reading this morning, there’s what seems like a generic, summary statement of Jesus’s activities. In 9:35, Matthew sums things up by saying, “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.” That seems a little ho-hum, nothing specific to talk about until you get to chapter 10, verses 6 through 8 and we realize it was important. Jesus tells them where to go, then says “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.” What Jesus sends them out to do are the exact things that made up Jesus’s ministry. They are to go out, not just in Jesus’s name, but almost as an extension of Jesus, they are to be the Body of Christ in the world, as we might say of ourselves.

That is a plenty ambitious agenda, a to-do list that would intimidate anyone. But Jesus’s instructions aren’t about how to go about any of the curing and raising and cleansing and casting out. He does tell them how to preach: “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” But there are no steps to follow in how to go about any of the other things he expects them to be able to do.

Jesus seems way more concerned about another “how” question: how they will need to be mentally and emotionally and spiritually prepared before they go out to proclaim the good news and spread Jesus’s ministry. In a word, they’ll need to be intrepid.

First, they aren't supposed to take a lot of extra stuff with them. When we have a lot of stuff to tote around, we tend to become focused on keeping up with our stuff rather than on what we're supposed to be doing. But without a lot of stuff, they'll have to rely on those they are visiting for shelter and food, water and clothing. There's a touch of "give us this day our daily bread" and another echo of the Israelites trusting in God to provide the manna they needed each day and no extra. This all sounds well and good, until we take a good hard look at ourselves and realize we aren't good at this kind of intrepid. We've seen that illustrated in the last few months, with people panic buying more things than they needed at the grocery store and creating shortages for their neighbors. Even this small part of intrepid discipleship is a challenge for us.

As it was a challenge for the disciples, because they were relying on strangers. Jesus's next words are full of cautions and warnings about how some places, they won't be welcomed. He instructs them to just keep on moving, shake the dust of that town off their sandals, and move on. But what if they were counting on the people of that town to provide the water, food, and shelter that they needed? Jesus indicates they'll just have to wait for God to provide.

Worse than the news that some towns won't welcome their ministry is the next section. "I'm sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Not only will some people and places not welcome them; some will actively work against them and persecute them and throw them in prison and hate them. Jesus is frankly not making this discipleship thing sound very appealing.

I'm sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Be intrepid. Fearless but discerning. Cautious yet filled with the fortitude of the Spirit. If it was just sheep and wolves, it would mean that everyone they encountered was opposed to them and a danger to their ministry and their survival. But there are some who will welcome them. How do they figure out who is a wolf and who is not? Are some wolves in sheep's clothing? If they treat everyone as if they are an enemy, they're not going to get very far in the work that Jesus has sent them to accomplish. But if they treat everyone as a friend, they will get killed, Jesus warns. Be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

That challenge is as much ours as it was the disciples'. Those that we think agree with us and will work alongside us end up saying or doing something that makes us realize we weren't working toward the same kingdom from the beginning. And those that we have separated ourselves from, thinking we would not be good partners, turn out to be exactly the people that God has called us to be in ministry alongside.

We can't go out and proclaim the kingdom and do Jesus's work and be guaranteed safety. It's not possible. Jesus doesn't promise that. Jesus, in fact, tells us just the opposite. It will be dangerous to us, to our bodies, to our minds, to our spirits. There's no way to find out if people are wolves or not, without being vulnerable. But Jesus has given us what we need, just like the more material provisions will come when we need them, the words that we need will come from the Spirit when we need them. The wisdom of the serpent and the innocence of the dove will come when we need it. Intrepid will come, as a gift of grace. And just as we remembered last week, Jesus will be with us, even to the end of the age.