

Traveling  
Matthew 9:35-10:23  
June 18, 2023  
First Presbyterian Luling

A couple of months ago, I had lunch with a professor from my college days. He's 90 years old and when he heard that I was working for the Presbytery, he assumed I would be in the office. As he lives just down the street, he offered to take me to lunch so we could catch up. I finagled my schedule so that could happen. One doesn't get too many opportunities to have lunch with 90 year old former professors, after all.

I can't remember how many classes he taught that I took. At least four or five. Maybe more. He was my advisor in the religion department. I was a teaching assistant for another class he taught my final semester. Lots of conversations and discussions about what I was writing, what I was planning to do with my life. He advised me not to go to seminary, unless I just couldn't help it. I couldn't help it.

He was a historian by training, and a sociologist by inclination. Not to mention he pastored me plenty. He had been the pastor of a small, rural congregation between seminary and graduate school, and he didn't lose those gifts as a professor.

All of that to say, I thoroughly enjoyed lunch with him and his wife. We talked about the good ol days just a little, and the intervening years a little bit, and quite a lot about the current state of the world. We didn't solve all the worlds problems, but maybe we got a little closer on a few.

Before the lunch, I had been aware that he had influenced my thinking. I was conscious of a few things. One of his favorite assignments was to send us out on a Sunday morning to experience different religious groups as they gathered. Then, of course, we had to write a paper about our visit. One of the questions we were supposed to address was what was the income level of the people in this religious community? Well, how were we supposed to figure that out? It was rude to ask them, but he taught us to observe clues. For instance, check the cars in the parking lot before you go inside. He claimed that was a reliable indicator, even more reliable than people's clothing, of their economic status. I still do that, and I remembered that it was something he taught us.

But the more we talked at lunch the other day, the more I realized how much I had internalized lots of other things he taught me, more subtle things. My conviction has always been—or at least I thought it was my conviction—that

people change their minds on big issues because they're in relationship with people who challenge their preconceived ideas. It's not speeches or demonstrations or new laws and regulations that change our minds, but people we know. As I'm not much given to public demonstrations and speeches, this conviction fit me well.

Well, what were we talking about at lunch but that very thing. He had done quite a bit of research and writing about the history of women's ordination being approved in various branches of the Presbyterian church. Interesting that that has been in the news this week, with our Southern Baptist siblings backtracking on the ordination of women. His conclusion from this research was that the changes came because people encountered and got to know women who were in ministry of one kind or another. And they gradually saw that it was good.

I thought that was my idea. I'd forgotten entirely that he taught us about that. But then I realized that I had sort of internalized it, until it became my own. As his student, I mirrored my teacher's convictions, even unconsciously. There are probably more examples, and not just with that professor, but with any number of people who I've admired and learned from over the years.

The student never stops being the student, and the student has their own thoughts and actions, but the student is also a reflection and extension of the teacher, at least in some ways. This makes it daunting to be a teacher, no?

All that is a long long way to introduce today's long long reading from Matthew. Jesus is sending the apostles out. This is the only place Matthew calls them "apostles" rather than "disciples," and he does so because "apostles" means something roughly like "the sent out ones" and here is precisely where he is "sending them out" (10:5).

He's sending them out with the authority to: cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. If we've been paying attention, we know that's precisely and exactly what Jesus himself has been doing. The disciples—apostles—are being sent out to do the same things Jesus was doing. The disciples are reflections of the rabbi.

As if it wasn't clear already, Jesus tells them also to proclaim the good news, with these words: "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Jesus himself says "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (4:17). John the Baptist has said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (3:2). Jesus is sending out the apostles to do the things he does and say the things he says. To have the compassion he feels and proclaim the good news he embodies.

The apostles, the disciples, us. We're reflections of Jesus. We are what people know about Jesus. That's daunting. Jesus's visible and tangible presence on earth is entrusted to us.

Even if it weren't a daunting responsibility, Jesus makes clear that it isn't going to be easy. Some people aren't going to welcome them; some people are going to hand them over to councils and governors and kings, to be arrested and persecuted. This shouldn't have been a surprise to them—this is the same Jesus who has already told them “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” (5:11).

But still. Jesus is sending them out to be his presence in the world. The world will receive them just as it receives Jesus himself. Jesus's ministry leads to the cross, and the apostles' ministry quite possibly leads them to persecution, too. It's all daunting.

We, no less than the apostles, are sent out. We're sent out with the same message of good news. We're sent out with the same compassion that brings healing and comfort. We're sent out with the same convictions against injustice and evil. We're sent out to do what Jesus would do if he were still here, and to preach what Jesus would preach. When people see and hear us, they conclude that we are reflections of Jesus himself, as students reflect their teacher. Let's reflect Jesus's love to a world that needs it so.