

On a Quest for God's Kingdom
Romans 5:1-8; Matt 9:35-10:23

With all that is going on in our world right now, I found myself looking for a little bit of a distraction this week. So, what could be better than watching something mindless on Netflix? I thought to myself, perhaps I will find a new show or a comedy to unwind with before I set about achieving the tasks I laid out for the day. When the circling sphere on my screen finally stopped, indicating Netflix had loaded, I found a selection of new releases staring back at me. First up was *13 Reasons Why*. “Wow! That’s still on?” I thought. A show that began on the premise of why a young small-town teenager took her own life was not exactly the light-hearted thing I was going for. I skimmed over a few forgettable films before something caught my eye.

It was a documentary entitled *Becoming*. *Becoming* is film about Michelle Obama’s experience of bringing her book of the same title to the nation. It is a behind-the-scenes look at her book tour as much as it is a window into her experience of life pre, post and during the White House. As I watched, I was captivated by the story of a woman who would not let the world define her. She worked and continues to work to know, define and express herself. She not only engages this personal process for her own well-being and fulfillment, but she selfless shares it with people wherever she goes. In taking on the challenge of, once again, redefining herself after her husband’s tenure in the White House came to a close, Obama felt called to share her gift for self-reflection and self-definition with America’s young people. She continues to go out of her way to meet with high school students, and young people of every stripe, to let them know they are beloved and their dreams not only matter, they are achievable with endurance.

She didn’t put any of this in religious terms, but I imagine her Christian roots motivating her quest to awaken the knowledge within our nation’s young people that they are beloved children of God. Thought of in this way, her quest would be to help our nation’s most vulnerable young people see their hopes and dreams need not be a fantasy. She was a working class African American girl from the southside of Chicago who for all intents and purposes society would label as not having a chance. She was told by her high school counselor that she shouldn’t bother to apply for Princeton because she wasn’t “Princeton material.” Obama reflected to herself that she had great grades, was involved in school activities and served as the Treasurer of her student body government. She reminded herself “why not me?” and applied. She was accepted and graduated from Princeton before going on to graduate from Harvard Law School and to practice law in Chicago. Grounded in the truth of her worth, she shares with those who doubt that too are worthy.

Our gospel reading today offers a similar movement of gathering the vulnerable, speaking their names and empowering them to become the future of Christ’s mission. In fact, our gospel reading this morning has some interesting narrative movements. It starts off focused on Jesus’

ministry before it shifts its focus to the disciples. Then, we hear the disciples called the apostles for the first and only time in Matthew.

The disciples, the students and followers of Jesus, are now the apostles, the delegates and messengers of Jesus. The author of Matthew names each one making sure to point out that Matthew was a tax collector, a person society deemed not a part of them. This fact, however, doesn't exclude him from being one of those sent out to do the work of Jesus. Jesus tells the newly minted apostles they have the same powers as him. They are to "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, [and] drive out demons." (Matt 10:8) For this work, Jesus strengthened the apostles by giving them "authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness." (Matt 10:1) He gave them the power to cast out, to drive out, to call out impulses that do not line up with the love of God and the love of neighbor.

Jesus tells the apostles they are to continue his work. Moreover, they are not to do it *in* his name. They are not to speak Jesus' teachings so as to convert people to their movement. They are to go about their mission *as* Jesus. They are not to talk about healing and redemption. They are to bring healing and redemption. They are not to talk about the right way to live. They are to show the right way to live.

In giving the apostles this task, Jesus makes it clear it is difficult work. It is not work people will run towards. He says, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few." Later on, he says, "I am sending you out as sheep among wolves." He tells them they will be questioned for the liberation they bring people. They will upset the authorities and will be brought before them to answer for their actions. Jesus' messengers may be ridiculed in the press, called fake news, or mocked on Twitter. Jesus' workers may be tear-gassed at a protest, or fired for disagreeing with those in power.

Healing the broken places of our society will bring joy to the suffering, but it is not jubilant work for Jesus' workers. It requires risk, and may bring personal suffering. Paul tells us, in Romans, you will not be left alone in this work. Fear not: for when you know not what to say the "Spirit of the Father will speak through you." Fear not because "God's love has been poured into your heart through the Holy Spirit" given to you. (Rom 5:5)

Of course, the idea that there is something glorious about suffering rubs us the wrong way. So much indignity and pain has been tolerated because of the idea that suffering brings one close to God. Often it is told to people who are not in power as a way to keep the status quo. There are church traditions which hold that the man is the head of the house and to be respected and followed regardless of his behavior. In such places, a woman might be told by her minister that she is to endure mental or physical violence for the sake of her husband's soul. I want to make it clear – this is not what I am talking about. Under no circumstance should we engage in suffering which attacks the very notion of our being a beloved and respected child of God.

But, there is something to be said for suffering which comes because you have done something right: for the suffering which comes because you stood up for the outcast and the marginalized. There is a strength of character that develops in such person. In my previous life as a martial arts instructor, we would talk about this as having an indomitable spirit. Literally, possessing a spirit which cannot be defeated. By cultivating indomitable spirit, one naturally grows stronger and can stand up ever more. Such knowledge of one's own strength and sense of purpose bolsters one's ability to be honest with oneself and others, integrity increases and the alignment of one's values with one's actions is increased. It produces character.

Finally, when one can see the changes in themselves and the sense of joy and freedom it brings regardless of the task at hand, hope fills the spirit. Hope for a better tomorrow. Hope for the possibility that God could do the same work in someone else. Hope for the Holy Spirit to animate more workers for Jesus. Hope for our nation's young people to know themselves and to define themselves regardless of the obstacles placed in their way. It is kind of like the experience of Jesus himself.

A poor carpenter from Nazareth who sees injustice in his world goes out to offer repentance for the actions of his government. His ruler, the client king Herod of Antipas, was rebuilding Galilee's capital of Sepphoris in the architectural style of those who had killed thousands of its inhabitants and burned much of it to the ground. Herod did these things in the name of stability and safety. He was perpetuating the idea that peace and prosperity could come only from Rome. Jesus sees this and offers a different way.

Where the empire casts out, Jesus brings in. Those who are rendered voiceless by empire are given voice. Those who do not have enough to eat are given food. Jesus does a 180 on the actions of Herod and the actions of Rome. For it, he suffers ridicule in the public square. He is questioned and undermined. He is labeled a terrorist, an insurrectionist, and is executed. His story is one of suffering. But, it is not only that.

His love and his ministry endured. In fact, his steadfast love and ministry continues to endure. It shall endure forever.

Christ died for us, while we were nothing more than scared and broken. The chaotic world Jesus experienced (the chaotic world we are experiencing) is the world into which God continues to send Spirit-filled agents of Jesus. If we allow God to move through us, we will open ourselves to the power of Jesus. If we go *as* Jesus to do the transforming work which heals, restores, and reconciles, hope will come alive and live amongst us.