

“Whatever Jesus Does, Do That”
Matthew 9:35-10:8
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The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry, who despite all claims to the contrary, still lives a couple of blocks from us, recently said a very simple yet compelling thing. In pondering this time of COVID-19 and racial inequalities, he said we might ask, “What would the sacrificial love of Jesus look like now?” In other words, Jesus is always about love, but what would his love look like in this time, what exactly would he be doing? “Do that,” Bishop Curry said, “Do that.”

It is very simple, much like the old *What Would Jesus Do?* emphasis with the WWJD bracelets. Some have critiqued that emphasis for being too simplistic, arguing that there was only one Jesus and thus perhaps we would be wiser to ask, “What would Jesus have us to do?” And the argument has merit. Yet the simplest form of the question is still compelling. “What would Jesus do?” is a good place for his followers in any time to begin, and in today’s reading from Matthew, Jesus calls his first disciples to do almost exactly what he does anyway.

Our passage begins with a summary statement. Matthew says Jesus is travelling about Galilee teaching in synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and sickness. He identifies a need for more followers, then he sends out the twelve and calls them to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near, and to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. In other words, Jesus proclaims the good news of the kingdom and is about the work of healing; then, he calls his followers to proclaim the good news of the kingdom and be about the work of healing. Whatever Jesus does, they are called to do that, so are we, and we have a pretty clear picture of what “that” is.

It begins with proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. When we hear the word *proclaiming*, we tend to think of telling others about

Jesus. We tend to think of evangelism and thus many of us tune out. We resonate with Rebecca Manley Pippert's observation, "There was a part of me that secretly felt evangelism was something you shouldn't do to your dog, let alone your friend (*Out of the Saltshaker and into the World: Evangelism As a Way of Life*, p. 16)." But telling others about Jesus is a part of our calling. Jesus wants the twelve to tell others about him. Personal faith matters, ours is linked to Christ, and so we have a calling to share the good news with others so that they may come to believe and experience the abundance of life God intends.

Yet what Jesus does and calls his disciples to do is to share not just any good news but some very specific good news about the kingdom of heaven, sometimes called the Kingdom of God. The kingdom, realm or reign is what Jesus brings near, and while it includes introducing people to Jesus, it includes much more — from the way we treat each other to the way we structure society. For God reigns over the whole world, not just our individual lives. God reigns over all things, not just inner personal things. No part of life is off-limits to God!

What do we pray each week? Thy kingdom come... thy will be done... on earth as it is in heaven. If we paid attention to that, we might not voice the words quite so quickly. Thy kingdom is about God's will, God's ways of justice and love, ruling not just in heaven but on earth, not just in our hearts but in the world, not just in the safe space of the church but in the public square and the marketplace and everywhere else! That's what we pray for every week, whether we realize it or not. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. It is a radical call to transformation in every part of life.

Lest there be any doubt, Jesus tells us what God's kingdom is like through parables and other teaching forms. It's like a loving parent welcoming home prodigal children in love. It's a like a hated outsider who takes care of a wounded victim of robbery on a dangerous road. It's like seed scattered in good soil, a small thing which grows a hundredfold. In God's realm, we love our neighbor, practice forgiveness, pray for our enemy, heal the sick, welcome the outcast, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner. In God's realm, no one is left out, no one is mistreated, no one is denied due process and killed on the spot, no one is

denied love because they were born somewhere else. In God's realm, good news is brought to the poor, release is proclaimed to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, the oppressed are set free and the year of the Lord's favor is proclaimed — at least this is what Jesus says.

And this is what we are called to proclaim because the kingdom of heaven means all of this and more. It is about personal faith, but it is also about social concern, and while we struggle to embrace both sides of this calling, we struggle most with the social part. I heard a preacher say years ago that Baptists like us struggle to swallow the whole Gos-pill. It is a big pill to swallow, he said. It has a personal side and a social side, and we struggle most to swallow the social side. We don't want to become political, and we shouldn't in the partisan sense, but sometimes mentioning a social concern, a Jesus concern, feels political.

Yet there are times when loving our neighbor requires that we speak up for our neighbor, and the truth is every social or public concern is also a personal human concern. Divorce was a challenging public issue not that long ago, but it was and is also a deeply personal issue. In like manner, the very mention of the word "race" can be unsettling, but the issues that have surfaced again in recent weeks concern real people, children of God, our brothers and sisters in the human family and the body of Christ. If we are to proclaim God's kingdom faithfully at a time like this, we cannot remain on the sidelines, we must speak up as church, we must add our voice to the growing chorus which sings of a world where all of God's children are treated with dignity and respect. We may differ on how we do it, but we must not differ on whether we do it.

We had a deacons meeting via Zoom on Wednesday of this week. It was longer than most deacons meetings but a lot shorter than four meetings would have been, and it was taking the place of four meetings. The longest, most difficult, most passionate, most encouraging part of this meeting, and just about any other deacons meeting I have attended in thirty-eight years of ministry, was a discussion about ways we might speak as a church about racial injustice. Different strategies were pondered — book studies, banners, protests, etc. — but there was complete agreement on the fact that it is a time to speak up. We will proclaim the kingdom of God and all that it implies.

But it was also mentioned during this deacons meeting that we need to do more than speak up, we need to act for justice, and this brings us back to the calling of Jesus, as recorded in our reading from Matthew. The twelve are called to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, and then they are called to be about the work of healing. If we are going to see what Jesus does and then do that, we will not just talk about justice, we will do justice, we will be about the work of healing.

Healing takes different forms. At times we need physical healing. This is the case right now with COVID-19. Our methodologies may differ from Jesus' methodologies and those of first-century disciples, but healing is still healing. Sickness and disease diminish life. All who participate in healing processes, beginning with medical professionals, are doing the work of God's realm.

At times we need emotional and psychological healing. This too is the case with COVID-19 as anxiety and depression are intensified by uncertainty and isolation. But mental health needs are ongoing, they are heavy burdens for families, not to mention a factor in homelessness, gun violence and other criminal behavior. Such needs are part of life, like cancer or heart disease, to be addressed by medical science with compassion. But we have stigmatized such needs and thus heightened the challenge, and we have underfunded mental health. Anyone who is involved in emotional and psychological healing — whether as a clinician, friend or public advocate — is doing the work of God's realm.

And to state the obvious, we also need spiritual healing — from brokenness and sin, from feelings of guilt and shame, from the damage done by bad religion and bad cultural messages. Jesus' life, death and resurrection offer a way to healing these ills, the way of grace, and his followers have the privilege of helping others experience it.

But while healing in individual lives is needed in all of these ways, healing is also needed in our culture for many social ills, beginning with racism. Prominent African-American pastor Otis Moss III recently said in his usual witty way that the three white men who killed Ahmaud Arbery while he was running tested positive for Confederate COVID-1619 (a reference to the year the first African slaves were brought to this land). He said this virus is often asymptomatic. It spreads by human

contact, rhetoric, ignorance and sometimes families. It is also called white supremacy, but by whatever name it is known, make no mistake, it is a disease which plagues our land, one we have a calling to heal.

And what is at stake is not only the wellbeing of our brothers and sisters in the human family and the body of Christ, those who suffer the ill effects of this illness because of the color of their skin; but also the witness and perhaps survival of the church.

Many of you know that I was not raised in the church because my mother gave up on it for two reasons — the church's judgment of her as a divorced person and its unwillingness to embrace integration. She didn't give up on Jesus, just the people who claimed to be his followers.

There were others who felt that way then, and we should be honest about the fact that the white church has not simply tolerated racism for centuries, at times it has adamantly defended it. In 1822, Richard Furman, the pastor of Charleston's First Baptist Church, said this in a letter written in defense of slavery to the governor of South Carolina.

Had the holding of slaves been a moral evil, it cannot be supposed, that the inspired Apostles, who feared not the faces of men, and were ready to lay down their lives in the cause of their God, would have tolerated it, for a moment, in the Christian Church ... surely, where both master and servant were Christian ... they would have enforced the law of Christ, and required, that the master should liberate his slave in the first instance.

But, instead of this, they let the relationship remain untouched, as being lawful and right, and insist on the relative duties. In proving this subject justifiable by Scriptural authority, its morality is also proved; for the Divine Law never sanctions immoral actions.

And lest we think that was 200 years ago, in 1998, Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, told Larry King he didn't see any loopholes in the biblical mandate for slaves to obey their masters, no matter what popular culture might say. He later apologized, but it was not the last in a long line of church defenses of slavery and racism.

The church has been an adamant defender of racism or a silent observer for too long, and while some people like my mother have left the church in the past because of this, the stakes are much higher today because young people simply will not have anything to do with an institution that can't openly repent and start following Jesus. While the refusal to pursue racial justice might have been a scar on the church's reputation in the past, it may be a nail in the coffin of the church today. We must not refuse to be about this work of healing.

So, what can we do? There are many options, some connected to the other half of First Baptist Church in Raleigh. We can do book studies, share fellowship and worship, show up at protests, and thus build relationships, claim common ground, be present in places that matter to persons of color. But we begin by examining our own hearts, taking time to listen and being more honest about the impact of racism.

Consciously chosen individual racist thoughts and actions have never been part of my life. Using the “n” word would get you tossed out of my home growing up. But I am still a product of my culture, I still benefit from white privilege. Racism isn't just personal, it is systemic. Until we are willing to acknowledge this reality, we will be part of the illness, not the cure. Healing can only begin when we admit that we have a disease. That's one thing Jesus would be doing now. He would not be practicing the three D's Dan Day names in his insightful article on Baptist News Global — delegation, deflection and denial. Jesus would be honestly facing the disease, even if the only cure is a cross.

But we do need to know that there is a cure. We may feel like giving up, or we may laugh like Sarah who is told by God she will have a child when she is ready to move to Springmoor, but what does God say to Sarah? “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord (Genesis 18:14)?”

There is a block of wood on my desk with two stones on it, a gift from a young man I baptized. The inscription reads, “Berlin Wall: 1961–1989.” It is a reminder that walls do not have to stand forever. Disease does not have to kill us. Racism does not have to be our legacy. Love, God's love, can prevail. There is a cure. There is hope, and as the Apostle Paul tells the church at Rome, hope does not disappoint us. So, whatever Jesus does, do that! Proclaim God's reign and help make it so!