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SERMON/ADDRESS TO THE 181ST CONVENTION OF THE DIOCESE OF MISSOURI
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Gospel: Matthew 9:35-38

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."

In the name of the One, Holy, & Living God. Amen.

It is a good time to be the church!

It is a good time to be the body of Christ!

It is a good time to follow Jesus.

In our gospel for tonight, Jesus has been running around the Holy Land doing the things you would expect from the Messiah.

In chapter 9 of Matthew's gospel alone, Jesus had:

- Healed a paralytic man;
- rebuked the Scribes;
- called Matthew, a despised collector of taxes to be his disciple;
- silenced the Pharisees for the umpteenth time;
- healed two blind men, who couldn't keep their mouths shut;
- cast out a demon;
- been accused of being the ruler of demons;
- and healed a man who had been mute.

All of this before dinner and with the rag tag band of followers who most of the time had absolutely no clue what they were doing, what Jesus was saying to them and couldn't even ask the right question of the Messiah if one came up to them a bit them.

And yet, after all that, after all that Jesus had done, after all the healing and teaching and preaching and proclaiming, Jesus looked at the crowd of God's people and had compassion on them. He saw them. He heard them. He saw the pain and the hurt, the grief and the loss. Jesus looked with compassion on those who have been abandoned, lost and forgotten. He didn't look on them with pity. He didn't look on them with despair. He didn't look on them with contempt. Jesus looked with compassion! And we are called to do the same!

In this time of global pandemic, in this time of racial reckoning, in this season of election division our world, our communities, our neighborhoods, our congregations are filled with people who have been abandoned, lost, and forgotten. Here in Missouri, in our rural communities, families are seeing their way of life disappear before their very eyes as the populations of small towns and cities face an uncertain future.¹ Generations of farmers, who sustained and fed our nation now struggling to plant and harvest their crops. In our urban communities, families wrestle with pollution, lack of affordable housing, and broken school systems, all the while struggling with under-employment and poverty. In every corner, we see the ravages of fear and neglect, with a longing for a past that is no more.

And we who follow Jesus, we still don't always get it right and sometime still ask the wrong questions, we are the ones Jesus continues to send out as laborers into this harvest. We are sent to bring Good News to the lost and the lonely, the abandoned and the abused, the forgotten and the frightened. We are called to walk with compassion alongside our siblings in Christ because the Good News of the Gospel demands nothing less!

¹ <https://health.mo.gov/living/families/ruralhealth/pdf/biennial2015.pdf>

It is a good time to be the church because like Jesus you and I must be companions alongside our sisters and brothers bringing compassion and hope. We know the despair of Good Friday and the triumph of Easter. We are the keepers of the sacred stories that bring liberation and life. It is in our spiritual DNA.

In 1835 Jackson Kemper was elected to be the missionary bishop to Missouri and Indiana. Bishop Kemper set out to discover what it meant to be a missionary bishop. In his time, Bishop Kemper traveled from the shores of Lake Superior to the Gulf of Mexico by steamboat, on horseback, by stagecoach, and often on foot. He slept in the wilderness or on the hard floor of a remote hunter's cabin. In one instance, he traveled four days in order to confirm a young person in northern Wisconsin. He carried all his possessions in his saddlebags: vestments, bible, prayer book, chalice and paten, and personal items.

During his tenure, he organized six dioceses, consecrated nearly a hundred churches, ordained more than two hundred priests and deacons, and confirmed almost 10,000 souls.² He followed the Gospel mandate to go out into the world and share the Good News!

Friends, it is a good time to be the Church because being mission-minded is in our spiritual DNA! In the five months, six days, eight hours and thirty-five minutes, give or take a few, that I have had the honor of serving along with you as Bishop, I could not be more proud of the people who make up this diocese. That missionary zeal to share the Good News, to walk in compassion with neighbor, and cure the social diseases that infect our nation. I have seen the creativity, innovation, and resilience which is deeply embedded in the soul of our diocese come to life in the face of tremendous challenge.

We must now be about the Good News of the Kingdom. We must now be about the work of naming and claiming the stories of those who are lost and afraid. We must now be about the

² <https://www.bishopkemperschool.org/who-is-bishop-kemper.html>

work of finding the broken-hearted and loosening the chains of oppression, division, and injustice.

This time of pandemic is the time for us to dream the Church God has imagined us to be for this time, for this day, for this moment. Friends, this is our time of fermentation. God is birthing something new, something holy, something set apart, in each one of us.

We are called to be like our Spiritual ancestors Shiphrah and Puah³, the Hebrew midwives who saved the children of Israel. Like these midwives, we are called to birth a new generation. We are called to create a tomorrow that can only be dreamed of today. You and I are called to join with God in midwifing the church that God has equipped us and envisioned us to be, and that we have longed for, for so long.

We must midwife the church that our world needs now. We must midwife the church for those who will come after us, standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before. In this present moment, in this time, in this place, the church is needed more than ever. We cannot shrink from the work of building the beloved community that God calls us to be.

Now the work of the church must be about the reconciling of God's people. We must dream, we must dare, and we must do the work that God has called us to do in this present moment. We must no longer hide our light underneath a bushel basket. We must no longer sit on the sidelines of the work of racial justice and peace. We must no longer be mere bystanders, we must walk and talk and tell and be Christ's compassion to an often broken and hurting world.

Let our history inform us that when things are at their most difficult the church is at its best. We are now called to offer Jesus our very best. We must not tire in the work of racial

³ Exodus 1:15–21.

reconciliation. We must not get weary of telling the good news of Jesus Christ. We must not waiver in caring for God's good creation.

We are no longer content with simply going to church. We must fix our eyes firmly on Jesus and **BE** the church. We are no longer mere churchgoers, we are followers of Jesus, doers of the Gospel, bearers of the light and ambassadors of love that will change the world.

In the words of the African American Spiritual, let us remind each other that,

*"Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.
There is balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole;
There's power enough in heaven, to heal a sin-sick soul."*

Friends, there truly is a balm in Gilead and we need be about the business of being that balm. We are an incarnational church and we must be incarnate in our communities if we are to partner with God in shaping the future. We must look beyond the doors of our churches into our neighborhoods and communities and walk alongside our neighbors in Christ.

We are invited in this season of change to be changed. If we are not willing to change, if we are not willing to risk boldly, to dare greatly, we will see our communities of faith become irrelevant.

We must have a vision of a church where Christ is our compass and our guide. Because, "a vision without a task is but a dream; a task without a vision is but drudgery; a vision with a task is the **hope** of the world."⁴ You and I must be the hope of the world.

We must ask ourselves:

- Are we willing to claim the stories of our past in order to be set free for God's future?

⁴ From a church in Sussex, England ca. 1730. Taken from David Allen's book Getting Things Done: The Art of Stressfree Productivity p.273

- Are we willing to be about the business of raising followers of Jesus Christ and not just church attenders?
- Are we willing to preach Christ crucified and risen, knowing that that is all that we have, and that is enough?
- Are we willing to risk bold, beautiful failures in our adventure with God?

I dream of a diocese where every Episcopalian is an evangelist, telling the Good News of Jesus. I dream of a church where every congregation, every community of faith, every ministry is thriving and not merely surviving. I dream of a diocese that reflects the wild and wonderful diversity of language, culture, race, orientations, traditions, and identities that God has blessed to live together in harmony. I dream of a church where we are about following Jesus and being laborers in the harvest.

To live that dream, and to achieve that dream, we must be inspiration stations. We must be outposts of hope. We must be peddlers of **Joy!**

It is with that promise, that this will be a season of discernment, of discovery, and of daring for the Diocese of Missouri. I firmly believe that we as the Diocese of Missouri, we who sit at the crossroads of this nation, are uniquely positioned to lead the church into God's wild and crazy life-giving, love-transforming, hope bringing, story sharing dream.

Together we will sing a new song, together we will dream a new church, and together we will walk hand in hand with Christ Jesus our Savior.

The Gospel reminds us that, *"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."*

And so as we embark on this new journey together, as we chart a new course and as we look towards the future to which God is calling us, join me in telling the new story, the new chapter; the singing of a new song, of midwifing our new future in hope, in joy, in love.

Together we can boldly proclaim.

*"My hope is built on nothing less
than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
but wholly lean on Jesus' name.
On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
all other ground is sinking sand,
all other ground is sinking sand."*

God bless you, God keep you and God send you as laborers in the harvest. Amen.