

Sermon: Proper 8A

Title: Discipleship as Vulnerability

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For the last three weeks, we have been walking through what many scholars call Jesus' Missionary Discourse in Matthew chapter ten. It began when Jesus summoned "his twelve" and sent them out. He told them where to go—to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He told them what to do—to proclaim the Good News that the kingdom of heaven has come near. And he told them what to expect—persecution, suffering, rejection, and even rupture within their closest relationships.

This discourse has not been particularly comforting. Jesus has spoken about crosses, opposition, division, and sacrifice. He has stripped away any illusion that discipleship is easy. Yet as chapter ten comes to a close, something important happens. The mission expands. No longer is Jesus speaking only about "the twelve." By the end of the chapter he is speaking about "these little ones"—all who would follow him. In other words, this is not just instruction for the apostles. It is instruction for us. And what Jesus reveals in these final verses is that discipleship is fundamentally an act of vulnerability.

Listen again to Jesus' words:

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

The word "welcome" can sound like a lesson in hospitality. We immediately imagine opening doors, setting tables, offering refreshments, and making guests comfortable. But the Greek word carries a deeper meaning. It means to receive, to take with the hand, to accept. Jesus is not primarily describing hospitality as an activity. He is describing reception. Acceptance. Receiving another person and what they bring.

That changes everything, because receiving another person requires vulnerability. It is one thing to offer help. It is another thing to need help. It is one thing to serve. It is another thing to depend upon the service of another. The disciples are being sent out with no guarantees, no power over outcomes, and no ability to force acceptance. They must rely on others receiving them. Their mission depends upon relationships they cannot control. That is vulnerability!

And perhaps that is why these verses challenge us. Many of us are comfortable being the giver. We like being useful. We like being needed. We like being self-sufficient. But discipleship calls us into mutual dependence.

Jesus creates a Beloved Community where people receive and are received, where people teach and are taught, where people serve and are served. The kingdom is not built by independent spiritual heroes. It is built through relationships of trust.

The New Interpreter's Bible observes that these verses "call readers to reexamine their own version of Christianity." That is an important challenge because many versions of Christianity emphasize strength, certainty, self-reliance, or personal achievement. But Matthew ten presents something quite different. It presents discipleship as vulnerability.

The disciple goes out carrying only what has been entrusted to them. The disciple proclaims what they have received. The disciple depends on others. The disciple trusts God. This is precisely the pattern Paul describes in Romans 6. We have been entrusted with a way of life. We have been united with Christ in his death and resurrection. Our calling is not to invent the Gospel but to live faithfully into what we have received. We teach what has been entrusted to us. We obey the One who has called us.

And that obedience requires trust. Notice that Jesus speaks repeatedly about *reward* in these verses. A prophet receives a prophet's reward. A righteous person receives a righteous person's reward. Even giving a cup of cold water to one of these little ones will not go unnoticed. Too often we hear this passage and focus on the cup of water. But the reward is not the water. The reward is God.

Karoline Lewis says it beautifully: the promise is that God is "seeing about it."
God sees. God knows. God provides. God takes responsibility for what belongs to God.

The promise of discipleship is not that every act will produce visible results. The promise is not success, comfort, or recognition. The promise is that God will see about it. That phrase reminds me of another story of vulnerability and trust. Abraham and Isaac journey up the mountain. Abraham has no clear understanding of how God will resolve the situation. Isaac asks the haunting question: "Where is the lamb?" And Abraham answers, "God will provide." Or more literally, God will see to it. God will see about it. At the crucial moment, there is a ram caught in the thicket.

God sees. God provides. God remains trustworthy.

That is the same confidence Jesus invites his disciples to embrace. They are sent out vulnerable and dependent, but not abandoned. Their lives are held within the faithfulness of God. And that is Good News because we live in a culture that prizes independence. We are taught that maturity means needing no one. But, the Gospel tells a different story. We belong to one another. We need one another. Our lives are interconnected and interdependent. The disciple cannot fulfill the mission alone. The one who is sent needs the one who receives. The teacher needs the listener. The giver needs the receiver. The church exists through reciprocal relationships.

This reciprocity matters because it protects us from distortions. Jesus helps us steer away from distorting others and ourselves through false dependencies, unreasonable expectations, and justified hopes (Emilie Townes, *Feasting on the Word*). When God's love is at the center of our lives, we no longer need to use other people to meet needs that only God can fulfill.

We can love freely.

We can receive graciously.

We can serve without controlling.

We can depend on others without making them responsible for our ultimate security.

When God's welcome of us becomes the foundation of our lives, our relationships become healthier, more honest, and more faithful. And that brings us back to the heart of this passage. What motivates discipleship? Not guilt. Not obligation. Not fear. What motivates discipleship is God's welcome of us.

Before we ever welcomed Christ, Christ welcomed us.

Before we ever received another person, God received us.

Before we trusted God, God entrusted God's very self to us in Jesus Christ.

Everything begins there.

The welcome of God creates a people capable of welcoming one another.

The trustworthiness of God creates a people capable of risking vulnerability.

The faithfulness of God creates a people capable of living in mutual dependence.

As Emilie Townes reminds us in *Feasting on the Word*, the life of faith is not confined to heroic acts reserved for those eligible for sainthood. The kingdom often appears in ordinary acts of faithfulness.

A word of encouragement. A listening ear. A shared meal. A cup of cold water.

Simple acts become holy because they participate in God's economy of grace.

And when we offer them—or receive them—we discover that discipleship is not about achieving greatness. It is about trusting God's faithfulness.

It is about believing that God will see about it.

As Matthew ten closes, Jesus broadens the mission beyond the twelve to all his followers, these little ones. The mission continues through ordinary disciples who trust an extraordinary God.

We are sent. We are received. We receive others. We depend on one another. And through it all, God remains at the center. The God who welcomed us. The God who sees us. The God who provides. The God who sees to it.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.