

1 October 2023, 18 Pentecost (Proper 21A, Track 1)
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

God's Mission, Our Mission

The Rev'd Michael Thompson, Esq.

Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. Amen.

If you haven't noticed, we've had a bit of a sermon series. Three weeks ago, the theme was that being in loving relationship with God requires being in loving relationship with one another – which includes all creation – and in being in loving relationship with one another and all creation, we are in loving relationship with God. That is the source of our celebration. Then we remembered that loving relationship sometimes requires that we let go of some things. Last week, the lesson was that, when anxiety creeps in, we get back to celebration by focusing on God's mission, trusting the rest will follow.

This week the question is "What exactly is God's mission?"

The word "mission" comes from the Latin word "*mittere*," meaning "to send." Sometimes a service of Holy Eucharist is called a "mass." And you might remember that we end with a dismissal. These words also come from "*mittere*." The words "mission," "mass," and "dismissal" all relate to sending. This is evident in the Prayer Book's post-communion prayers. One asks God to "[s]end us now into the world in peace . . . to love and serve you." The other asks God to "send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you . . ." What we do here on Sundays is about mission. It is about sending. After being empowered and equipped, we are sent to do the work God has given us to do.

This is one of the lessons we see in today's Gospel reading. First, Jesus trips up the religious leaders by asking where baptism comes from. Then, Jesus

tells a parable about two sons, neither whom does what he says he will but one of whom does as his father asks. Baptism is our “Yes” to participating in God’s mission. But just saying “Yes” – or for the Jewish religious leaders of the day just knowing the law – is not enough. We must live out our “Yes” in the world.

I’ve told you what “mission” means, that baptism is our “Yes” to participating in God’s mission, and that we must do – rather than just say – “Yes,” but I still haven’t answered the question. What is God’s mission in the world? Well, like Jesus, I’ll answer with some questions. What did Jesus do? What did Jesus send his disciples, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to do? Helpfully, we get a nice summary just before today’s Gospel passage.

Chapter 21 begins on Palm Sunday. Jesus enters Jerusalem to shouts of “Hosanna” and people laying cloaks and palms at his feet. He then goes to the Temple, drives out the merchants, and overturns the moneychangers’ tables. Next, Jesus heals the blind and the lame and defends children’s shouts of joy.

When we get to today’s Gospel, it’s the next day. Jesus returns to the scene of the crime to teach, and the religious leaders ask him by what authority he is “doing these things.” Jesus, by what authority do you come into the Temple, make a mess, chastise us, heal people, and have these children making all this noise?

To fully appreciate today’s Gospel passage, we need to remember Jesus raising you-know-what in the Temple. What is that all about? It’s about justice and liberation. In a place where the focus should have been on loving God and God’s beloved creation, people were more concerned with making a buck at the expense of the poor, cheating one another, ignoring the needy, and shutting up children. That is not what God is about. That is not what we are called to do.

God’s mission is to lift the poor, to heal the sick, and to advocate for and free the marginalized and oppressed. God’s mission of love and reconciliation demands justice and liberation. In Jesus, God proclaims that all of creation is so beloved that God personally frees and restores creation to the goodness God intended from the start. God’s mission in the world is love for all things, to love all creation into renewal and revitalization. And love requires justice and freedom.

Today, we honor St. Francis of Assisi, the Season of Creation recognized by churches around the world, and bless beloved creatures of God. The theme of this year's Season of Creation is "Let Justice and Peace Flow." That is the theme of our faith. God's mission is love. God's mission is justice. God's mission is liberation. We say "Yes" to all of that in our baptismal promises to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving [our] neighbor as [ourselves]," to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being," and to "cherish the wondrous works of God, and protect the beauty and integrity of all creation." Thus, God's mission becomes our mission.

Friends, it's all connected. Loving relationship with God means loving relationship with everything God created. Loving relationship means saying "Yes" to God's mission of love, reconciliation, justice, and liberation. It means saying "Yes" to spreading by word and deed to every corner of the earth, to every person, and to all creation that God has profound, unshakable love for everything God has made. So much so that God gave God's very self to free us from everything we put between creation and the goodness God proclaimed in the beginning. We are to be, as God is, breakers of chains, bringers of Good News, and lovers of all creation. That is God's mission. That is our mission.

Amen.