

“Ready, Set...”

Romans 5:1-5; Matthew 9:35—10:16 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts
to the Spirit’s preparation, as we are called into service. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

Our scriptures are well-timed today, as we anticipate the new ministry year starting on July 1st and celebrate our high school graduates. What we really have here in Matthew, is a preparation-for-launch story. You could almost look at the instructions Jesus gives the twelve here like a speech someone is giving at a commencement ceremony. There’s even a list of their names, like each one is being handed their diploma in turn.

The first few verses we heard from Matthew are the end of the disciples’ education; Jesus is showing them what the work of God looks like – healing, teaching, sharing the good news. He impresses upon them why this work is so important. And then, their degrees are granted – Jesus gives them the authority to do these miraculous things as well. But then come the caveats... Just because you have this authority doesn’t mean everyone is going to care. You’re going to have to discern which situations are worth investing your time and effort into. This is solid advice, for graduates and for volunteers in a small but passionate congregation.

In many ways, this is just Jesus getting the disciples ready for their practice round. He’s still around to provide guidance and give them feedback; they’re only

going to Jewish communities for now, no Gentiles or Samaritans. Jesus himself hasn't even learned the lesson the Canaanite woman will teach him that will help him understand how his ministry is going to expand far beyond the barriers he initially assumed. Once he's ascended and the Holy Spirit has arrived, the scope will grow exponentially, both in terms of the harvest and who the laborers are. But for now, Jesus is concerned with getting the twelve ready for their practice round. You've got to start somewhere!

There are two major themes in Jesus' advice that are also reflected in the verses we heard from Romans this morning. I want to talk about the second one first – this dynamic relationship between peace and suffering. The way Jesus talks about this is so interesting. He assumes that many villages and households will welcome the disciples and their message. He instructs them to extend their peace to these communities. But he also warns them that some people may not want what they are offering. In these cases, he says, you should “let your peace return to you.” Isn't that a remarkable way of putting it? He doesn't say to take it away. He doesn't say that they should extend whatever the opposite of peace is. He just says to “let your peace return to you.” Shake off the dust, he says. This is often seen as a gesture of rejection, and in some sense it is. But the phrase “let your peace return to you” makes me think this is a nuanced concept of rejection. Jesus isn't telling them to reject the people; he's just saying to let the rejection slide off, like water off a duck's back. Don't let the pain of that rejection cling to you or linger in ways that will slow you

down. Your peace is more powerful than the impact of someone rejecting it. It will withstand being dismissed by those who don't understand or appreciate it. It will not be damaged or fail to sustain you. We see this reflected in Romans 5, when Paul explains the cycle that takes us from suffering to hope: "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us." And all of that is possible because throughout the whole ordeal, we are grounded in the peace of God. Though we share that peace with others – who may embrace it or may deny it – regardless of the response, it will not leave us.

This sort of grounding speaks to a level of confidence and faith that can sometimes seem hard to achieve. Rejection can throw us for a loop, especially when we're just getting started, whether as a brand-new college student or a new committee chair. I think that's why Jesus spent so much time preparing his disciples for this. "Shake off the dust," he said. I think of so many of my colleagues – fellow women in ministry, who came out of the Baptist tradition or are still struggling to serve within it – as the Southern Baptist Convention earlier this week dug itself deeper into the hole of denying the full belovedness of women called by God to serve. Shake off the dust, I want to cry to them. Don't waste your heart and soul and gifts on those who reject them. Do not let them steal your peace. Do not let them degrade your hope. God will deal with them. Meanwhile, we have good news to share!

But it's one thing when it's a village full of strangers you've only just met. A whole other level of peace is required when the rejection is coming from mentors and family members and the tradition that formed you. When we set out to achieve goals, perhaps pursuing a major that interests us, and discover that the way our brain works makes it hard to jump the hurdles that particular field involves, it's hard to maintain our hope. Not every path is our path, even some of the ones that look enticing and fun. As we follow our calling, we have to discern the fruitfulness of every step. "Wise as serpents and innocent as doves," Jesus called it. There is no need to denigrate those things that aren't right for us. We maintain our integrity by not causing others harm. But we also don't need to embrace those things, contorting ourselves into boxes that are the wrong shape for who we are. When we discern that something isn't for us, the right thing to do is walk away, without letting the mismatch linger on our souls encouraging self-pity or resentment.

All of this works better when we ground ourselves in the other theme from these two scripture passages, which is trust in God. "Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God," Paul writes. Jesus makes it much more practical. I'm sending you out. But don't take anything with you; just trust that God will provide. Don't take money, or extra clothes or sandals, or a staff. A staff? Personally, I'm really grateful for my staff and I don't think I would have made it this far without them! But maybe that's because God provided them, instead of me bringing them with me?

But seriously, this is 12th level trust Jesus is asking for here. Go out into the world, know that some folks will welcome you and others will laugh you out of town, but trust that God will provide for your needs through those you meet. The late, dear Gene Blumenfeld would have reminded us here that FROG stands for Fully Rely On God! This is the faith that Paul is talking about that provides the peace that empowers us to get from suffering to hope. Paul even implies that those experiences that cause us to have to shake the dust off our feet are the things that will deepen our character to the point that we can stay grounded in that peace and continue trusting God even when things are going wrong. It's beginning to make sense that the disciples needed a practice round, isn't it?

Just as Jesus was preparing his disciples for launch, the Holy Spirit is preparing us for launch as well. Some of us into post-high school life. Some of us into new forms of ministry. All of us, as a congregation, into a new season of sharing the welcome that we have received from Christ. As we look ahead to the service of installation we'll have next Sunday, when we ask all our lay leaders to commit to the ministries to which they've been called, but also to their own spiritual development, we can give thanks that Jesus gave us such important wisdom. Trust God. Share freely. Don't let setbacks slow you down. Discern carefully where and how to use your time and energy, so that our work can be most fruitful. May we take these lessons to heart and flourish in the work of Christ! Hallelujah and Amen!