

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
Proper 6, Year A
Matthew 9:35-10:23

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Today's program is sponsored by Sandy Kramer in thanksgiving for the staff of the Northumberland Animal Hospital and the care they give to our companion animals.

I like the saying, "Be careful what you pray for; you might get it!" That saying came to mind as I noticed the progression of ideas in today's gospel reading. What we come across first is Jesus' response to the crowd, and what he tells his disciples to do about it: "When Jesus 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." I expect the disciples were fine with praying that God would do that. So how does God answer that prayer? The next thing we know, Jesus summons his twelve disciples, gives them authority over unclean spirits, and sends them out with the instructions, "Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." Be careful what you pray for, because sometimes the answer to your prayers is you!

I expect the response of the disciples would be, "Yeah, I prayed for you to send somebody, but I didn't mean me!" As another popular saying goes, "humans tell God their plans, and God laughs." And as Jesus goes on with the instructions to the disciples, the process of carrying them out just sounds more and more scary and intimidating. I can picture them thinking, "What have we gotten ourselves into with this stuff?" It seems almost as if Jesus is making it harder and scarier on purpose. Not only do they have the hostility of other people to deal with, Jesus tells them they can't even take any money or a second pair of sandals. But maybe the purpose of this answered prayer is not only for the

benefit of the sheep they are sent to, maybe the other purpose of this answered prayer is for the benefit of the disciples themselves.

I have always loved the brief quote from Eleanor Roosevelt, “You must do the thing you think you cannot do.” I saw that quote this week on the front of a graduation card someone had given Kendall, and the card included a bit more of the quote. It said, “You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face...do the thing you think you cannot do.” I liked that even better. I thought about the times we pray for strength, courage and confidence. Often, the answer to those prayers is you facing your fears to do the scary thing. It is not just the accomplishment of the scary task that matters, it is that facing our fears is, in itself, the way we gain strength, courage, and confidence.

In looking at this card, I noticed that there was an ellipsis in the middle, those three little dots to signal that something had been omitted. For one thing, I was impressed. In an age in which quotes get mangled so routinely, the English teacher in me was thrilled to see that this card manufacturer had been so meticulous as to include the ellipsis. To give credit where credit is due, and in case you want to support companies who use good punctuation, the cardmaker is called “quotable cards”. And with my feeling of admiration, there was also my curiosity about what was left out of this quote on the card. So I looked it up. Here’s the full quote from Eleanor Roosevelt:

“You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, ‘I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.’ You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”

So while I can see why that part would be left out on the card, the gutsy honesty of it gives it a weight and depth that’s worth a lot. Some of the things we go

through are horrors, and they are exactly what make us able to say to ourselves that we can take the next thing that comes along.

While I am in some ways sympathetic to attempts to make discipleship seem easier and more appealing by removing the stuff that's difficult or painful, and the attempts to make Christianity more appealing by removing or downplaying the stuff that's difficult or painful, such as the crucifixion, I am also skeptical of those attempts because of my sense that in watering it down too much to please ourselves or others, we lose something essential. The reality is that God gives us a lot of gifts, and some of them come in the form of pleasant experiences, some of them come in the form of going through horrors, and some of them come in the form of doing the things you think you cannot do. Discipleship that is always easy will inevitably result in a life of stunted growth.

It might seem that avoiding the things you are afraid of would make your life easier, but in reality it turns out to be the exact opposite. The people who try to escape their fears gradually live smaller and smaller lives in which every year they are afraid of more and more things, as their life becomes increasingly ruled by fear. The people who face their fears gradually live larger and larger lives in which every year they are afraid of fewer and fewer things, as their life becomes increasingly led by love and courage.

I don't believe that our facing our fears is the only way God operates in the world. There are some situations that are genuinely outside our control, such as praying for good weather. Also, God has placed plenty of gifts in my life all along that were not a result of anything I did or didn't do. There are also some situations in which the responsibility for solving the problem properly belongs to someone else, and sometimes the best and wisest course of action is minding your own business. Sometimes the answer to prayer comes through another person, sometimes the answer to prayer comes directly from God. With that said, it's

also important to recognize that sometimes the answer to prayer comes through you. Sometimes you pray and God sends you out to look fear in the face, to live through a few horrors and see that you can take the next thing that comes along, to do the thing you think you cannot do, to gain strength, courage, and confidence. Be careful what you pray for. You might get it!